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From GROW to GROUP: theoretical issues and a practical model for group coaching in organisations

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Despite considerable organisational development research and practice suggesting that interventions in organisations should also be targeted at the group level, most organisational coaching is dyadic (one-to-one) and few models of group coaching have been developed. In Part I of this paper we present an introductory overview of group coaching and compare it to other group-based interventions. We distinguish between the goal-focused nature of group coaching and the process-orientation of group facilitation, and posit that group coaching has important but under-used potential as a means of creating goal-focused change in organisational contexts. In Part II of this paper we address practice issues and we present a practical model of GROUP (Goal, Reality, Options, Understanding others, Perform) coaching that integrates the well-known GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward) coaching framework with Scharma's U process for group dialogue, double loop learning and other theoretically-grounded practices. From a practitioner's perspective, we draw on the extant literature, we compare group coaching to other team and group-based interventions. Although precisely distinguishing between different group-based change modalities is difficult, we argue that group coaching is a more goal directed process than group facilitation, and that group coaching has important but under-used potential as a means of creating change in organizational contexts.

Keywords: executive coaching; group coaching; organisational coaching; evidence-based coaching; positive psychology

Introduction

The use of coaching in organisations as a means of enhancing performance and facilitating workplace learning is now commonplace across much of the developed Western world. In the US, between 25% and 40% of US Fortune 500 companies regularly use the services of external executive coaches, with similar rates reported in Europe and Australia (International Coach Federation, 2007). Within organisations, human resource and organisational development professionals are expected to act as internal performance coaches as part of their every-day role (Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2008). However, regardless of whether organisational coaching is conducted by internal or external coaches or consultants, coaching in organisational settings continues to be almost exclusively conducted in a dyadic (one-to-one) format (Ward,

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2008), despite a rich history of other organisational development interventions being principally targeted at the group level (Brown & Harvey, 2006; Schein, 1999).

A major criticism of the dyadic approach is that it fails to position systemic factors at the core of the coaching process (O'Neill, 2000; Paige, 2002; Wheelan, 2003). Indeed, many leading organisational learning theorists place systemic awareness at the centre of their learning models (e.g., Scharma, 2007; Senge, 2006). Such individuals argue that, to foster real change and development in organisational settings, it is critical that individuals and groups have a high level of systemic awareness and an understanding of organisations, and their various sub-groups, as dynamic and complex systems.

Extending this line of reasoning, proponents of group-level interventions argue that group work develops 'systems thinking' in its participants. They argue that the group itself becomes a microcosm of the organisational environment, and that individual and group performance improves due to the broader awareness, alignment and accountability achieved through the process of dialogue with others (Scharma, 2007; Schein, 2003; Senge, 2006). Because of these and other proposed benefits there is currently an emerging shift by coaching practitioners and academics towards promoting and offering group coaching programs (Ward, 2008).

In line with this emerging trend we present an introductory overview of group coaching, and argue for the increased use of group coaching in organisational settings, alongside dyadic coaching. We contend that the personal growth and change benefits of dyadic coaching when combined with the systemic growth and change benefits of group process, better enables performance improvement at the individual, group and organisational levels. This argument is based on the emerging group coaching literature as well as a rich tradition of group interventions within organisational development.

In Part I of this paper we present an introductory overview of group coaching, compare and contrast dyadic and group coaching and discuss a number of other group intervention approaches commonplace in organisations. Finally, in order to help those coaching practitioners and consultants who are more familiar with dyadic coaching to make a transition to group coaching, in Part II of this paper we present a practical group coaching methodology that combines the popular GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward) model of coaching (Whitmore, 2002), with Scharma's (2007) 'U Process' framework for group dialogue.

Part I: theoretical issues

Different approaches to group coaching

As will be observed throughout the discussion that follows, a confounding factor when discussing 'group coaching' is the fact that the terms 'team' and 'group' are frequently used interchangeably in the coaching literature. However, the meaning of these two terms differ somewhat. 'Team coaching' can be distinguished from 'group coaching' in that team coaching can be understood as relating specifically to groups where the individuals are working closely together towards a defined and mutually accountable goal (Bloisi, Cook, & Hunsaker, 2003). In contrast, 'group coaching' is a broader category that relates to any group of individuals, including but not limited to

teams, whether participants are working together towards specific goals or not. In this paper we primarily focus on the broader group coaching categorisation, but we draw on literature from both team coaching and group coaching perspectives.

Group coaching involves a coach (or coaches) and two or more coachees, and this type of coaching stands in contrast to the more commonly-practiced individual or one-to-one coaching which is conducted in a dyadic form with a coach and a single coachee. Like dyadic coaching, group coaching tends to be focussed on change and growth. However, a primary difference between the practice of group coaching and the practice of dyadic coaching is that group coaches need a strong understanding of group dynamics or group-based dialogue processes, in addition to the individual interpersonal and rapport-building skills necessary for dyadic coaching. Thus, in the same way that dyadic coaching requires the coach to be able to develop good individual rapport with the coachee, group coaching requires good rapport at the group level, and an understanding of group dynamics is essential for this to occur.

Approaches to dyadic coaching vary considerably in relation to the way that coaching is delivered. For example, some approaches emphasise a non-directive approach to coaching, others focus more on the delivery of expert advice from consultants, some emphasise the role of the internal coach compared to the external coach (for discussion see Stober & Grant, 2006). Similarly, the emerging group coaching literature also presents a number of different accounts of group coaching. Some approaches use a combination of individual and group coaching, other approaches focus on coaching individuals on their individual goals within a group setting. Some focus on coaching the group as a unique entity with a focus on the group dynamics. Yet others use various combinations of these together.

Anderson, Anderson and Mayo (2008) and Diedrich (2001) coach simultaneously at the group and individual level, depending on whether the development need is one for the group or specifically for an individual. Ward (2008) works with leaders from different organisations in a single group setting, which is primarily focussed on the development of the individual within the group, while leveraging input from a range of varying peer perspectives and experiences.

Kets de Vries (2005) takes a purposefully holistic perspective in his work with leadership groups and teams. He simultaneously provides coaching, develops the individual participant's own coaching skills, and then facilitates a process of peer coaching to maximise insight and overcome group and individual obstacles to growth. Finally, participants are then encouraged to cascade a similar approach through their own teams using the coaching skills and approaches they have learnt.

Some authors such as Anderson et al. (2008), Diedrich (2001), and Ward (2008) have emphasised the role of the *external* coach who comes into the organisation to provide group coaching services to functional group and senior executive teams. In such approaches the emphasis is often on the goal-focused nature of coaching. In contrast, the work of Hackman and Wageman (2005) has tended to emphasise the role of the *internal* coach, proposing that team coaching should ideally be one of a subset of acts of leadership which is conducted by either the formal team leader or a member of the team rather than by external coaches or consultants. Others take a more inclusive position and argue that group coaching aimed at facilitating team building or leadership effectiveness can be appropriately implemented by either an external coach or a team leader acting as an internal coach (Goldsmith & Morgan, 2000).

The question then arises, regardless of the coaching modality and whether the coaching intervention is aimed at the functional team or at the broader group level, why should coaching be conducted in team or group settings?

Why coach in groups?

The emerging group coaching literature outlines a long list of purported benefits of group coaching (e.g., Anderson et al., 2008; Ascentia, 2005; Kets de Vries, 2005; Ward, 2008):

- Understanding of and self-regulation of acceptable group behaviours;
- development of greater insight into the psychodynamic process of the group;
- improved likelihood of durable changes in behaviour;
- development of trust and support within the group;
- improved listening and communication;
- constructive conflict resolution;
- appreciation and alignment of individual goals, strengths and values;
- greater commitment and accountability;
- development of coaching skills;
- increased emotional intelligence;
- leadership development;
- improved systemic awareness of the organisation;
- prevention of organisational silo formation;
- knowledge transfer and management;
- improved group energy levels;
- creation of high performance teams; and
- better organisational results.

As can be seen, the list of assumed benefits is comprehensive and impressive.

However, to date much of the reported benefits are anecdotal, and there is very little solid outcome research delineating the effects of group or team coaching. In examining the group and team coaching literature, such as it is, Hackman and Wageman (2005) note a lack of 'evidence that addresses all links in the coaching intervention – team process – team performance sequence' (p. 271). Their research, based primarily on the training literature, finds little robust evidence that coaching interventions focussed on improving interpersonal relationships reliably improve performance. Their recommendations for future research and practice of team or group coaching is that it should explicitly focus on the attainment of specific tasks or desired outcomes, and they recommend making these goals as concrete and tangible as possible. Their goal-focused approach is reflected in their understanding of team coaching, which they define as a 'direct interaction with a team intended to help members make coordinated and task-appropriate use of their collective resources in accomplishing the team's work' (p. 269).

Systemic perspectives facilitate learning in groups

Despite the current shortage of robust scientific evidence that explicitly links group coaching interventions based on interpersonal or group dynamic perspectives with increased organisational performance, there is longstanding support for a range of

other interventions at the group or system level (e.g., Argyris, 1991; Brown & Harvey, 2006; Schein, 1999; Senge, 2006). Indeed, systems-level thinking stands out across the coaching literature as both a common benefit of group interventions and a criticism of dyadic coaching. O'Neill (2000) sees systems perspectives as being central to effective executive coaching. Paige (2002) views the inability of the individual coachee to make changes within the existing organisation culture or at a systemic level as one of the major limitations of dyadic coaching.

In a similar vein, the broader organisational development and change literature supports a systemic approach to change and growth. Wheelan (2003, p. 187) writes about the importance of educating leaders on 'group development, the characteristics of effective teams, and the importance of taking a systemic view of group problems'. Kets de Vries (2005) views group coaching as more effective than dyadic coaching because it deals with both cognition and affect within the organisational system rather than focusing merely on individual goal attainment. Kotter's (2007) work on organisational change stresses the importance of a guiding coalition and the need to plan systemically because of the natural tendency of the organisation to resist change.

From a systemic theoretical perspective the argument for coaching to take place in a group with broader representation of the system itself and with the benefits of multiple perspectives is certainly compelling. However, group coaching has several limitations: For group coaching to be effective and appropriate, individuals must be willing participants. Kets de Vries (2005) discusses the importance of participant consent, and voices ethical concerns regarding participants who are required under duress to participate in group coaching programs, particularly where discourses of a personal nature may occur. Of course, confidentiality is also an important consideration for all coaching interventions. Certain sensitive or personal issues may best be addressed in dyadic coaching, just as individual therapy is more appropriate in certain circumstances than group therapy.

Group coaching is challenging

Even where the coaching issues are not overtly personal, there may be reluctance to step outside the customary topics and explore issues normally avoided by the group. Such breaching of group norms is likely to raise anxiety at both an individual and group level but, when well handled by the group coach, the discomfort that comes with disclosing within the group may well be the catalyst for change and for overcoming complex organisational challenges. Conversely, when these tensions are handled in an unskilled fashion the result can provoke unhelpful defensive reasoning (e.g., Argyris, 1991) and the group can end up pouring much time, effort and energy into justifying their own and other's behaviour rather than constructively exploring the tensions that surface.

Without a doubt, many participants find group coaching highly challenging and often personally difficult, yet paradoxically it is often this discomfort that fosters real change. Because of these issues, it may be that a judicious combination of individual and group coaching is optimal, and this has been recommended by many of the proponents of group coaching (e.g., Anderson, et al., 2008) as well as some members of the broader organisational development community (Schein, 1999). Thus, group coaching may be more appropriate wherever the goal is at the group level or where

individuals would benefit from broader perspectives, support and accountability and where participants agree to take part in a group process. Of course, group-level means of enhancing performance and well-being are not new. Group coaching has been long utilised within the sporting arena. Further, within the mental health field a wide range of approaches to group therapy are well-established, and group approaches to therapy are generally found to be at least as effective as individual therapy for a wide range of problems including anger management, substance abuse, social skills training and depression (see for example, McDermut, Miller, & Brown, 2001).

Within organisations, group-level interventions have been an integral part of organisation development (OD) approaches since the 1950s. Organisational development as a discipline evolved from several key areas; the laboratory-based work of the National Training Laboratories which started in 1949; the survey research methods originated by the Survey Research Centre founded in 1958; and, the work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations founded in 1946. These methods were all either pioneered or influenced by Kurt Lewin during the 1940s, and all have the group as the central point of intervention.

Organisational development, process consulting and coaching

Organisation development practitioners and consultants often use process interventions in order to help functional work groups or teams become more effective. According to Brown and Harvey (2006), 80% of OD practitioners use process-consulting skills, far more than any other OD skill set. Process interventions assist the group to become aware of how they operate and how they work together, and how to use this knowledge to solve their own problems.

Edgar Schein, considered one of the founders of organisational development, first wrote on process consulting in 1969, 'out of a sense of frustration that my colleagues did not understand what I did ... with clients in organisations' (Schein, 1999, p. xi). Schein views process consulting as more than a set of techniques; it is as much a philosophy and an attitude about the process of helping individuals, groups, organisations and communities, and is based on the central assumption that the primary role of the process consultant is to help the human system to help itself.

Schein contrasts his process consulting approach to two other approaches to consulting, namely; the consultant as expert (the selling and telling model), and the consultant as diagnostician (the doctor – patient model). He sees merit in each of these approaches, and posits that the boundaries between them are flexible and that there is some measure of overlap. In Schein's view process consulting generally starts with the development of the helping relationship, then proceeds into a joint diagnosis phase (consultant and client) and then into various interventions.

The majority of interventions in this modality occur with groups and Schein refers to these group processes as 'facilitation' rather than group coaching. In Schein's approach process consultants also work with individuals, and Schein refers to these individual processes as 'coaching'. Schein explicitly defines coaching as working with individuals, and sees coaching as a subset of consulting with the coach moving between the same three stages, expert, diagnostician and process consultant, as required. He views the role of coaching as establishing behaviours that helps the client to develop new ways of seeing, feeling, and behaving in problematic situations.

Schein does consider the possibility of coaching group goals, but not primarily within a group coaching setting. Rather, his coaching approach is to coach the individual so that the individual is then able to influence the broader organisational system.

According to Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie (2009), contemporary OD and human resource development (HRD) practitioners see coaching as being a central component of their professional domains. In their examination of the different conceptualisations and definitions across the respective literatures Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie (2009) observe that coaching, OD and HRD are, 'very similar, both in terms of their intended purpose and processes' (p. 13) and that their theoretical underpinnings are, 'nearly identical' (p. 21). They find that central to coaching is the provision of, '. . .''help'' to individuals and organisations through some form of ''facilitation'' activity or intervention . . . performed primarily (though not exclusively) in a ''one-to-one'' helping relationship' (p. 18).

Is group coaching the same as group facilitation?

As can be seen from the above, the facilitation of group processes has long been part of the organisational learning and development repertoire. The question thus arises: Is group coaching merely a new term for group facilitation?

The extant literature is somewhat confused on this point, and the lack of clarity in distinguishing between group coaching and group facilitation echoes the long-running debate in the coaching literature about the differences between counselling and coaching (Grant, 2007). This clarity is not helped by the fact that, like coaching, group facilitation draws on a wide range of theories and approaches which are spread across various academic and professional disciplines, including; Lewin's action research (1943), Argyris's (1991) double loop learning, Revan's action learning (1979), Schein's (1999) process consulting and Senge's (2006) concept of the learning organisation.

From a pragmatic perspective, Schuman and the International Association of Facilitators argue that group facilitation is simply about, 'helping groups do better' (Schuman, 2005; p. 3). Other commentators see group facilitation as being focused on the group process and participation in such processes, rather than being focused on specific outcomes. For example, Hunter, Bailey and Taylor (1996) see facilitation as being about process, *how* something is done, rather than about *what* is done, which they see as the content. Hunter et al. see the main premise of group facilitation as 'full co-operation between all people . . . values of equality, shared decision making, equal opportunity, power sharing and personal responsibility are basic to full co-operation' (p. 20). Adding to the conceptual confusion, within the context of workplace training the term 'facilitation' is frequently used to describe group-based training processes, and this umbrella approach includes modalities such as action learning, organisational learning and coaching within a group training context.

Thus, across the literature, group coaching and group facilitation are regarded as being extremely similar, indeed the terms are often used interchangeably. In particular, the process consulting approaches described by Schein are very closely aligned with coaching. As mentioned, when Schein is using his approach with individuals he calls it coaching and when he is working with groups he calls it facilitation.

In attempting to untangle this conceptual muddle, Clutterbuck (2007) presents a somewhat more nuanced approach and attempts to draw a clear distinction between coaching and facilitation, applied within a team coaching context. In his view the facilitator manages the dialogue for the team and focuses them on decision making. The coach empowers the team to manage the dialogue themselves and focuses on goal achievement. The coach is more active as a member of the team, providing feedback and creating a 'separate space where the team can collaborate in seeking understanding of the issues' (p. 101). The facilitator remains detached from the team and focuses on the team process. He views the facilitator as a 'catalyst' while the coach is more of a 'reagent', themselves 'engaged in and changed by the dialogue' (p. 101).

Clutterbuck's work provides some important clarity about these concepts, but even here there is some overlap. For example, he posits that the team coach, 'works within team dynamics' while the team facilitator 'understands team dynamics', the team coach 'shares the learning process' while the team facilitator 'manages the learning process' (p. 102). He notes that from time to time both the coach and the facilitator may move from one role to the other as required, but also suggests that, 'clarity of role is likely to lead to greater effectiveness' (p. 101). Although some clarity on distinguishing between the roles of coach and facilitator is achieved here, a level of overlap and ambiguity still remains.

In summary, we suggest that group coaching, conducted either with teams or at a broader group level, has important but under-used potential as a means of creating goal-focused change in organisational contexts. As regards distinguishing between group coaching and group facilitation, an aggregate view of the different perspectives outlined above suggests that group coaching is more goal focused than the process-orientation of group facilitation and that the roles of coach and facilitator are subtlety different. The difference in these roles may best be understood as laying on a spectrum or dimension, and although theoretically dissimilar, in practice the boundaries between these modalities are somewhat blurred. Moving on from the preceding theoretical discussion, we now turn to issues of practice and present a practical framework for group coaching.

Part II: a model for practice

From GROW to GROUP: goals, reality and the way forward

In order to ensure that coaching conversations stay goal focused, many coaches purposefully structure the coaching conversation. The GROW model (Whitmore, 2002) is one of the most commonly used methods of structuring the coaching conversation. Each letter of the acronym GROW represents one stage of a coaching conversation.

When using the GROW model the session starts by setting a goal for the coaching session. Coach and coachee then explore the current reality, before developing options for action and concluding with specific action steps that help define the way forward. An outline of the GROW model is provided in Table 1 (adapted from Spence & Grant, 2007).

Table 1. The GROW model.

Acronym	Description	Example Questions
Goal	Coachee is asked to clarify what they want to achieve from each session. Determines the focus of coaching.	What do you want to achieve this session? How would you like to feel afterwards? What would be the best use of this time?
Reality	Raise awareness of present realities. Examine how current situation is impacting coachee's goals.	How have things gone in the past week? How have you handled any problems? What worked? What didn't work?
Options	Identify and assess available options. Encourage solution focused thinking and brainstorming.	What possible options do you have? What has worked for you in the past? What haven't you tried yet that might work?
Way forward	Assist the coachee to determine next steps. Develop an action plan and build motivation.	What is the most important thing to do next? What might get in the way? Who will be able to support you? How will you feel when this is done?

It should be noted that this process is not linear, but iterative with the conversation moving backwards and forwards between phases to refine and clarify the best course of action. Each coaching session finishes with clearly defined action steps to be completed before the next coaching session. Subsequent coaching sessions begin by reviewing and evaluating the between-session action steps, before moving on to set a goal/s for the session; the RE-GROW model (Review, Evaluate, Goal, Reality, Options and Way Forward; Greene & Grant, 2003).

Of course the GROW model can be used for group coaching as well as dyadic coaching. However, as already mentioned, an important facet of group coaching is the explicit inclusion of processes related to group dynamics, and this aspect is not made overt in the GROW model. To this end we now outline some ideas for a practical model of group coaching to help guide the practice of group coaching; the GROUP model, and we present this approach as a more goal-focused approach and as a possible alternative to other group dynamic approaches or the psychodynamic approaches described in the group coaching literature.

The understanding others phase: generative dialogue

The GROUP model (Goal, Reality, Options, Understanding others, Perform. See Table 2) follows the same initial phases of goal setting, reality exploration and option generation as the GROW model, but these are enacted in a group setting. The differentiation from the GROW model comes in the fourth phase (the 'Understanding Others' phase). This phase draws on the group dialogue process developed by Otto Scharma (2007) as a way to design and lead deep collaborative learning processes.

The ability to truly understand others is a key factor in successful group coaching. A group can only be truly transformed to the extent to which its members

Table 2. The GROUP model.

Acronym	Description	Example Questions
Goal	Group is asked to clarify what they want to achieve from each session. Determines the focus of coaching.	What do you want to achieve this session? How would you like to feel afterwards? What would be the best use of this time?
Reality	Raise awareness of present realities. Examine how current situation is impacting group's goals.	How have things gone in the past week? How have you handled any problems? What worked? What didn't work?
Options	Identify and assess available options. Encourage solution focused thinking and brainstorming.	What possible options do you have? What has worked for you in the past? What haven't you tried yet that might work?
Understand others	Group observes deeply, notices their internal responses to what is being said and makes meaning both of what they hear and their internal response. The group connects to the emerging best future.	What is your view on the best options? What did you understand by her view? What was your internal dialogue when you were listening to that? Can you integrate the broader group perspective?
Perform	Assist the group to determine next steps. Prototype best options. Develop individual and group action plans. Build motivation and ensure accountability.	What is the most important thing to do next? What can be learnt from this prototype? What might get in the way? Who will be able to support you? How will you feel when this is done?

understand their fellow group members. The word 'understanding' means to grasp the significance, implications, or importance of the information conveyed. Interestingly it has been reported that, for Thomas Edison, the term 'understanding' meant to *stand under*. Edison's idea is that it is only by acknowledging that one stands below someone or something else that we become open to obtaining and retaining information from it (*Understanding,* 2008), and this sense of humility and openness characterises this phase of the GROUP model.

The 'Understanding Others' phase is designed to foster a shift in individual and group awareness, which then enables generative solutions at a systemic level rather than the more common reactive responses on a symptom level. This is a sophisticated, subtle, yet profound process that requires appropriate set-up, group commitment and skilled coaching. We contend that the result is often increased awareness of previous individual and team blind spots, and the creation of new possibilities and solutions.

The notion of generative dialogue is central to the 'Understanding Others' phase. It is important to recognise that there are vital differences between the constructs of dialogue and discussion. In short, the root of the word *dialogue* stems from the Greek words *dai* and *logos*, with *dai* meaning 'through' and *logos* meaning 'word' or 'meaning' (Isaacs, 1999). Thus dialogue can be understood as a flow of meaning, a conversation in which people *think together*. This is a conversation in which the participants are genuinely open to possibilities, are truly prepared to let go of the

quest for certainty and the need to be right, and in the process are often changed as people (for an excellent in depth exposition of these issues see Isaacs, 1999).

In contrast to the synergies found in *dialogue*, Isaacs argues that in *discussion* people see themselves as being separate from each other, they take specific positions and the conversation goes back and forth like a table-tennis match. Where dialogue is about generating insights, discussion is about making decisions, and about closure and completion. Indeed, the word *decide* means to 'resolve difficulties by cutting through them ... its roots literally mean to murder the alternative' (Scharma, 2007, p. 42). Dialogue enables a group to, 'reach a higher level of consciousness and creativity through the gradual creation of a shared set of meanings and a "common" thinking process' (Scharma, 2007, p. 42).

The role of the group coach in the Understanding Others phase is to help the group members to suspend judgement, become more comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, to be open, to listen to others, and most importantly to listen to their own personal internal processes. This kind of mindful engagement in dialogue is not easy, but in Schein's view is a central element of any approach to organisational transformation.

The essentially personal aspect of this process is highlighted by Schein (2003) himself who recalls his own first encounters with dialogue where he found himself spending, 'more time in self-analysis, attempting to understand what my own assumptions were, and was relatively less focused on "active listening" ... dialogue participants do listen actively to each other, but the path for getting there is quite different' (p. 30).

The performing phase: action design and implementation

In the final phase (the 'Performing' phase), the group moves from option generation and dialogue and into action design and implementation. Individual and group action steps are determined within the group coaching setting, and this open exchange of ideas in the group setting is designed to ensure clarity, transparency, commitment and accountability across all participants. The term 'performing' in this context draws from Tuckman's (1965) notion of group stages, and it is important to note that the performing stage incorporates activities both within the coaching session and activities outside of the coaching session. This is the beginning of an ongoing iterative learning process where the best options from earlier stages are developed as prototypes, and then further refined, tested and ultimately either adopted or discarded. Scharma (2007) talks about this process as learning from the future as it emerges and evolves.

The performing phase draws on two key additional schools of thought. Firstly, it draws from principles of 'prototyping' which are common to design industries (Christensen, 2008). Secondly, it draws on theories of looped learning, and in particular Argyris' (1991) model of double loop learning. Both schools of thought are well suited to enabling the application of systemic perspectives to problem solving or innovation – which is ultimately the goal of the GROUP process.

The concept of prototypes is central to this phase of group coaching. One of the key strengths of using the notion of prototypes as a frame of reference for this stage of the coaching process is that prototypes are always in a continuous evolutionary process of design, testing, and change. Most importantly, the notion of prototypes,

as impermanent constructs which are subject to ongoing refinement and development, helps participants in the group coaching process to let go of unhelpful ideas, deal with uncertainly and ambiguity. 'Failure' thus becomes an important part of the learning process. This phase, handled well, incorporates both double and triple loop learning.

Argyris's (1991) approach to double loop learning requires that learners examine and challenge their underlying values and assumptions, in addition to trying to solve the presenting problem. It is the new perspectives that are created during this process that allow the emergence of novel ideas; as the adage ascribed to Einstein states, significant problems cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them.

When the group coaching process is skilfully executed, it may well create triple loop learning (Hawkins, 1991; Hargrove, 2003). Hargrove's (2003) approach to executive coaching extends the notion of double looped learning, describing triple loop learning as being about altering individual's way of being and their sense of self. In his view single loop learning is about altering techniques, double loop learning is altering people's mental models and thinking, and triple loop learning is about fundamental changes in the way people are – transformation. Indeed, according to Senge (2006) this type of transformative learning is critical to solving complex problems and to genuine innovative thought. Although triple loop learning involves high levels of ambiguity, uncertainty, and willingness to fail, such vulnerability is balanced by the positive energy created within the group as new directions and possibilities emerge from the group process. Of course, transformational change cannot be prescriptively produced on demand in the coaching session. Rather, given the right conditions, such change emerges from the group process.

RE-GROUP: the review and evaluate phase

The ongoing process of idea development and refinement continues in subsequent GROUP coaching sessions. Subsequent sessions follow a process of RE-GROUP (Review, Evaluate, Goal, Reality, Options, Understand others, Perform). The action steps performed since the previous coaching session are systematically reviewed and evaluated before new goals are established or adapted.

Once again, this process should be conducted at two or three levels of looped learning. The action steps taken since the previous meeting are reviewed and evaluated (single looped learning). In addition, the group coach encourages participants to examine their underlying assumptions and mental models (double looped learning), and where appropriate, encourages the group to identify areas where personal change or transformation has occurred (triple looped learning).

Caution: a flexible methodology, not rigid ideology

The GROUP model is presented here as a proposed practical guide or template for the group coaching process. We want to emphasise the importance of coaches using this model in a flexible and client-centred fashion. This is a methodology to help the process of group coaching, not an ideology to be strictly adhered to. Our coaching experience suggests that coaching sessions should generally begin by setting explicit

goals for the coaching conversation where possible, and should conclude by delineating specific actions to be completed by participants.

Of course, all coaching conversations do not follow exactly the same pattern. Once broad goals for the session have been set, and the current reality of the situation explored, some groups may be better served by moving into the Understanding others phase before addressing the Options phase. For example, if group members have very low understanding of other group members' needs, strengths and recourses, it may be useful to raise such awareness by first implementing the Understanding Others phase, and then moving into the Options phase. In some cases, the group may find it hard to delineate specific goals at the beginning of the coaching session, and in such cases it may be useful to first explore the current reality before moving into goal setting.

The coach's flexibility and skill in reading the group dynamics are the key factors here. Clearly, it is important that the coach be attuned to the needs of the client group, treating each group as a unique entity, respecting and working with the group processes as they emerge, rather than foisting preconceived ideas or models of change onto the group. Our experience of coaching both individuals and groups within organisations reinforces time again the flexibility required in applying this and other coaching methodologies. Thus, in practice the GROUP model is more of a mental model than a stepped, linear framework and provides a useful map for the coach to help him/her navigate groups through the coaching process: Like all maps, it is only a guide to the terrain, not the terrain itself.

Are there times when group coaching is not appropriate? Of course. In relation to the question of when to use a group coaching process, as previously mentioned, it is critical that the group coach should ensure that participant consent exists before commencing the group coaching process. For issues of a more personal nature, where disclosure within the group is not possible, or where consent for coaching in a group does not exist, dyadic coaching may be more suitable. In some instances a combination of group coaching and dyadic coaching may be optimal, where group and some individual goals are addressed within the group setting and the more personal individual goals addressed one-to-one with the coach.

There will of course be instances where the issues to be addressed are more therapeutic, where the mental health of participants is uncertain, and neither group or dyadic coaching is appropriate (for an in depth discussion of mental health issues in coaching see Cavanagh, 2005). In addition, some group dynamics or communications might be in such a poor state that another form of conflict resolution process or mediation might be more appropriate, and we would caution against coercing the members of such groups into a coaching process. However, where the goal is one for the group, or individual goals are being addressed and participants consent to the group coaching process, we believe there are many benefits associated with the group coaching process.

Summary

Dyadic coaching now has considerable momentum as the preferred approach within organisations. However, for more than 50 years organisational development

practitioners have primarily focused interventions at the group level. Therefore, the emergence of group coaching seems a logical integration of these change methodologies. We have presented an overview of group coaching and have argued that it can be an important means of goal-focused change in organisational settings. In addition, we have outlined a model of GROUP coaching that integrates the dyadic GROW model with Scharma's U Process and other established group methodologies. We believe that this approach to group coaching provides an effective way of harnessing the goal-focused nature of dyadic coaching with the dynamic energy and systemic perspectives inherent in group processes, thus positioning systemic factors at the core of the coaching process. In this way, and through developing systems thinking in their clients, executive coaches and consultants may better foster real change at the individual, group and organisational level.

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