

ARE YOU TEAM COACHING COMPETENT?

To accompany the AC's team coach accreditation scheme, launched this month, [Declan Woods](#) introduces the AC's new team coaching competency framework.

While competency models have their critics, they still have their place: they inform and guide good practice, and the concept of competencies is helpfully widely known and understood. As the use of competencies has served the AC's other coach accreditation schemes well, we chose to continue using them in our work raising standards of team coaching.

As a reminder, the AC defines a team as: 'Collaboration between a recognised group of people drawing upon individual capabilities and strengths who are committed to working together inter-dependently to achieve a common purpose and collective performance and learning goals.'

And it defines team coaching as: 'The application of coaching skills while working with a whole, intact team over time to improve inter-dependent members' abilities to work together collaboratively to achieve the team's collective purpose, potential and performance.'

Team coaching training programmes teach coaches the skills to work with teams, whereas competencies refer to measuring the ability to use these skills effectively while coaching teams. Competencies combine a coach's skills, abilities and knowledge.

Rather than using them in a reductionist way, the best team practitioners will use the competency model flexibly and dynamically as they adapt their practice to a team's changing needs.

This article is presented using Rudyard Kipling's famous 'six honest serving men' as a structure – why, who, how, when, what and what next – and will focus mostly on the 'what' to increase understanding of the competencies.

WHY?

With a plethora of competency models readily available, why did we choose to create a new one? Team coaching is a relatively new way to support and develop teams at work and its use is on the rise. I wrote about this and the drivers behind its growth in the July issue of *Coaching Perspectives*. Given team coaching's relative newness, it is not surprising that it is not clearly or widely understood. Indeed, my experience (as a practising team coach) is that there is significant misunderstanding about it among teams and how it is both alike and different to other team interventions. This will form the basis of a future article. Creating a specific team coaching competency model provided the opportunity to bring some much-needed clarity to a confused market for practitioners and teams alike.

WHO?

The team coaching competency model is designed for many uses and users. The hope is that it will be used to educate organisations about team coaching and inform providers' design and delivery of their team coach training programmes. The chief aim is that these competencies will develop and raise standards of team coaching practice and that, through this, teams at work will be better served and supported.

HOW?

Creating this team coaching competency framework was a major undertaking involving many contributors over a period of more than three years. Thank you all. The methodology to design them involved a five-step process:

1. reviewing of the available literature – on teams and groups;
2. gathering of subject matter expert (SME) tasks and KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics);
3. validating the interview findings; and
4. developing a team coaching competency model.

The focus of the literature reviewed was wider than teams per se, and included existing research on groups and fields related to team coaching (e.g., group reflective practice, group analysis, organisational development and so on).

Step two entailed conducting semi-structured interviews with dozens of team coaches and practitioners (those that work with teams but who do not necessarily identify as a coach). The aim was to gather a widespread and diverse set of participants that (we hoped) encompassed a range of different ways of working with teams. We were interested in understanding how they went about working with teams and groups and the requisite knowledge, skills and abilities they needed for this.

We codified the interview findings into themes then tested them with both the coaches we had interviewed and other practitioners, in order to validate them before organising them into a team coaching competency model. We consulted on this model and made changes in light of further inputs and feedback, and will continue to refine it as the practice of team coaching evolves over time.

WHEN?

Whether you are a practising team coach, organisational buyer of team coaching or team coach training provider, the team coaching competency framework is available to use now. You can download it on the AC website.

WHAT?

Let's bring these team coaching competencies to life.

Competency 1: meets ethical and professional practice guidelines

This competency is about practising safely and ethically. Safe practice involves operating within the boundaries of your training, abilities and fitness to practice. It is also about working within the scope of work and in ways that have been agreed (contracted for) with a team.

Behaving ethically is vital when coaching teams. Practically, this means being able to understand what a team needs and to align this with an appropriate intervention. There are numerous potential

ethical pitfalls to be encountered while team coaching, and so this is a very important competency.

This competency also involves appreciating and explaining how team coaching differs from other work with teams (e.g., facilitation or teambuilding) and providing the best solution.

To do this, it will help if team coaches have thought about their approach to team coaching so they can articulate it to a team. It is acting in the best interests of the team. That is different from acquiescing to a team's demands. It is doing the right thing for the team, tough as that might be at times.

Competency 2: establishes the coaching agreement

Many difficulties within team coaching can be tracked back to a lack of – or insufficient – contract with a team. This competency is about creating a clear and agreed coaching agenda, approving how all parties will work together during the coaching in a way that is in line with both what the team needs and the coach's espoused approach. While remaining congruent with this, a team coach will work to a team's (changing) agenda, and not their own.

Competency 3: establishes a safe and trust-based relationship with the client

Teams can be challenging places to work. Sometimes they are not safe. Making them psychologically safe for members helps create the conditions for learning, taking risks, and trying new things and ways of working, and is a key component of what makes a team effective and high performing.

Creating strong relationships can help team safety. Team coaching can be seen as a relational process, developing a relationship between coach and team leader, with individual team members and with the whole team. The client is all these parties. Understanding and attending to all their needs is key.

Competency 4: coach presence and self-management

Teams can be challenging for coaches too. Practitioners will need to be able to work with their own emotional reactions to a team and manage their state (as well as that of the team) while looking after and resourcing themselves. Supervision is an invaluable support for coaches in this area.

Equally, coaches can use the (somatic and affective) awareness of their and the team's state as a source of data to inform the coaching and make deliberate use of their presence accordingly.

This competency also encompasses being aware of our biases, preference and habits – and the potential effect of these during team coaching.

Competency 5: effective communications

This competency covers a range of core communication skills – questioning, listening, observing – and using these openly and directly with the team to improve mutual understanding. It is also about the skill of encouraging a team to improve its ability to communicate better. Use of these skills allows a team to express difficulties, which can be liberating.

Competency 6: awareness and insight-raising

This competency builds on the previous one and includes the coach sharing information and giving feedback. The aim of this is to increase a team's awareness, sense-making and ability to generate new thinking. This could either arise from the use of information from outside the team (e.g., the coach introducing customer or stakeholder feedback), inside the team (e.g., the coach encouraging different conversations between members) or from the coach's 'use of self' (e.g., the coach sharing their observations or explaining how they have been affected by the team somatically).

The use of psychometric and team (effectiveness) tools can help raise a team's awareness and is included in this competency.

Competency 7: live team coaching

Like competency 1, this competency is a critical one. It is the delivery of live coaching with a team. Dynamics are always present in teams. Understanding and being able to work with them and help teams resolve any conflicts is a core part of the work. Coaches able to use a range of approaches flexibly will be the best placed to do this, and this competency is about understanding and expanding a coach's range of practices and using them intentionally with a team. Working with a co-team coach (whether another external coach or an internal one) is also included here.

Competency 8: maintaining progress in team coaching

Coaching is a means to an end and should help teams work towards this – whether that be focusing on team purpose, potential or performance. The challenge for the coach is leaving responsibility for performance with the team while following through on their actions.

This competency is about a team coach keeping the end and outcomes in mind and focusing a team on them without taking on responsibility for them. It includes helping a team to identify what is working and what might be hindering team progress, and then making changes and improvements to the team's systems, processes and norms. Evaluating the effectiveness of team coaching is part of this competency.

Competency 9: working with the organisational system

Teams in organisations rarely exist in isolation. They work alongside other teams inside and outside of the organisation. Understanding this complexity and the interplay between them is important and is the essence of this competency. Encouraging a team to connect with others is part of this. It is important for a team coach to understand an organisation within its context. This includes working within the scope of any organisational policies and aligning the team coaching work to support the wider organisational aims.

This competency also includes a team coach understanding existing roles, relationships and sources of power and authority – and working with these.

Competency 10: team knowledge

Knowledge is key. For team coaches, that is knowing about teams, what makes them effective, how they change and develop, team and interpersonal dynamics and dysfunction, systems theories and so on.

It is also valuable for a team coach to understand the vital role leaders

play and how teams work, change, develop over time and become more effective. The knowledge domains shown here inform a team coach's approach and model (competency 1) and how they coach in practice (competency 7).

Competency 11: coach professional development

Team coaching is challenging work. This is also part of its joy. To stay at 'the top of our game' requires ongoing professional development as a team coach. This competency encourages team coaches to engage in ongoing reflective professional practice and regular development. It urges practitioners to engage in supervision of their case work with teams and to understand themselves, their vulnerabilities and their triggers with teams more fully.

SO WHAT?

Feedback on the team coaching competency model during testing and consultation has been positive:

- 'I am impressed that the team coaching competencies are concise, inclusive and practical. They are very well thought out and their purposes are clear.'
- 'Very comprehensive and detailed. Really great overview for a team coach.'
- 'I am thoroughly impressed with the breadth and depth of the competency framework and the pragmatic and flexible approach to assessment.'

It is encouraging we are on the right path.

WHAT NEXT?

The team coaching competency model is an integral part of the AC's new team coach and team coach training programme accreditation schemes. These have been in final testing stages over the summer and early autumn and, we are delighted to say, have just launched. We hope you will have seen the separate communications about this: do look out for more to follow, including a more detailed article about this in the upcoming January 2023 issue of *Coaching Perspectives*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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