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SHAPE-SHIFTING: A CONCEPUTAL FRAMEWORK FOR COACHING WORK TEAMS

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LAURA L. HAUSER, MS, MA

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This dissertation has been accepted for
the faculty of Fielding Graduate University by

_____

Placida V. Gallegos, PhD
Committee Chair

Committee:
Katrina S. Rogers, PhD, Faculty Reader
Patrice E. Rosenthal, PhD, Faculty Reader
Stephen P. Presley, Student Reader
Anthony M. Grant, PhD, External Examiner

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Shape-Shifting: A Conceptual Framework for Coaching Work Teams

by

Laura L. Hauser, MSOD, MA

Abstract

This study explored a relatively unexamined but emerging issue in practice and research: coaching work teams conducted by an external coach. It examined the role behaviors of external coaches and the influencers of those role behaviors when coaching a work team. A qualitative descriptive study was conducted using thematic analysis of interviews with eight experienced coaches located in the United States. Four role behaviors were identified: advisor, educator, catalyzer, and assimilator. Four influencers on these behaviors also were identified: coach background, client perceptions and readiness, coaching goals, and systemic context. The findings led to five conclusions: (a) External coaches who work with teams shape-shift role behaviors along both directive and dialogic continuums over time; (b) external coaches attempt to reduce role confusion about the emerging practice of coaching work teams by describing their role based on the coaches' understanding of their clients' experiences and perceptions of coaching; (c) coaching a work team is more complex than coaching individuals due to the systemic context; (d) the effect of working with a team's larger organizational system is greater than coaching only one part of the system, thus, creating leverage; and (e) coaching work teams, compared to coaching individuals, requires a broader base of knowledge, skills, and experience, notably related to team performance, group dynamics, team development, and systems. This study contributes to the literature as the first empirical study about coaching in the context of work teams conducted by external coaches that

culminated with the development of a new framework called Shape-Shifting: A

Conceptual Framework for Coaching Work Teams. The framework can inform a range of

constituents including researchers, organizational leaders, organization development

consultants, coach psychologists, and educators. This study further contributes to the

literature by pointing to distinctions between coaching individuals and coaching teams,

and between coaching and facilitating a team. Lastly, this study proposes an expanded

definition of team coaching inclusive of both internal (manager) and external coaches.

These various findings and the shape-shifting framework may deepen understanding

about the benefits, limitations, practices, and unresolved questions about coaching work

teams.

Key Words: executive coaching, team coaching, group and team development,
organization change and development, role behavior

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Framework for Categorizing Group and Team Literatures

Specific to the growth and development of teams, we can draw from related literature to help understand and coach teams. Theories about groups and group behavior have their roots and origins primarily in psychology, sociology, and communication. However, there exists no one universally accepted definition, nor one unifying theory nor codification about groups and group behavior. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I categorized core theories and concepts about small groups into four primary perspectives that serve as lenses to view and understand groups and teams. The following framework builds on Hauser's (2011) Framework For Understanding Theories of Small Groups and Teams. It provides four different perspectives, or sets of lenses, through which one can observe and understand the workings of a group and that lead to different coaching choices and results. These four perspectives include group task, group dynamics and processes, team development, and systems.

Group Task Perspective

The first perspective is categorized as *group task*, which examines what the group *does* (Berdahl, 1998; Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Greenberg & Baron, 2008; Griffin & McClish, 2000; Hackman, 1987; Hackman & Morris, 1975; Hirokawa & Poole, 1996; Janis, 1971, 1983; Langfred, 2000; Morgan, 2006; Poole & Hollingshead, 2005; Roby & Lanzetta, 1958; Simon, 1944; Sundstrom, 1999). According to the group task

perspective, a group's primary function is to perform a task, and its work is accomplished through a cycle of receiving inputs, processing the inputs, and producing outputs (Poole & Hollingshead, 2005). Thus, the effective accomplishment of tasks is achieved through cognitive work (e.g., reaching a good group decision, generating ideas, or solving a problem) and physical work (e.g., building widgets, blazing a trail, or remodeling a home; Poole & Hollingshead, 2005). When a group performs its tasks, several factors impact members' interactions and, thus, their ability to successfully achieve its goals. These factors include, but are not limited to, group composition, group structure, decision making processes, and groupthink (Berdahl, 1998; Campion et al., 1993; Greenberg & Baron, 2008; Hackman, 1987; Poole & Hollingshead, 2005; Simon, 1944; Sundstrom, 1999).

Group Process and Dynamics Perspective

The second perspective is categorized as *group process and dynamics*, which refers to *how* the group does its work (Bion, 1961; Lewin, 1943, 1951; Smith & Berg, 1997). The terms *group dynamics* and *group process(es)* often are used interchangeably in the literature. Based on my synthesis of the literature and for the purposes of this study, I define *group dynamics* as the behavioral interactions between group members and between groups; I define *group process* as the underlying emotional and psychological processes that influence behavior, regardless of the task at hand (Smith & Berg, 1997).

The group process and dynamics perspective assumes that a group's processes and dynamics impact its ability to perform its tasks. This perspective focuses on the social interactions between group members and between the group and its environment. It

looks at the underlying emotional and psychological processes that influence

behavior and, thus, the performance of tasks, such as hidden assumptions, group norms,

and the degree of interdependence between the group members and the group and its

environment (see Forsyth, 2010 for a comprehensive review of group dynamics theories).

Thus, some of the factors that impact the effectiveness of a group include (but are not

limited to) interdependency with its environment (Lewin, 1951), conscious and

unconscious emotions and assumptions (Bion, 1961), and group think (Janis, 1971,

1983). These foundational theories are well documented and discussed in the literature as

key elements that impact the team's ability to effectively perform its tasks.

More recently, Losada and Heaphy (2004) conducted an empirical study that

added to positive organizational scholarship and understanding of the dynamics of high-

performing business teams. They concluded that high-performing business teams within

organizations are able to tap into the "liberating and creative power of positivity" (p. 761)

and outperform when three conditions exist:

1. The polarity of other and self (you and I) is integrated into a sense of we.

2. The polarity of inquiry and advocacy (questions and answers) drive a

productive and ongoing dialogue.

3. There exists a feedback system consisting of an abundance of positivity

(positive verbal communication of the team in terms of approving statements) grounded

in negativity (constructive disapproving statements).

Group Development Perspective

The third perspective examined in this section is categorized as *group

development*, which refers to how the group *develops over time* (Bennis & Shepard,

1956; Schutz, 1958, 1966, 1971, 1994; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Rickards & Moger, 2000). Closely related to group processes and dynamics, the literature about group development reveals a wide range of theoretical models. Three models frequently cited in the literature come from Bennis and Shepard (1956), Schutz, (1958, 1971, 1994), and Tuckman (1965; Tuckman & Jensen 1977). These theories posit that just as individuals grow and develop, teams and groups develop over time. Understanding this normative development can shed light on how a team's life stage might impact the team's performance and achievement of its tasks and goals. Therefore, group development theories provide normative data about what teams might be experiencing based on their age and lifecycle.

Systemic Perspective

A fourth perspective is categorized as *the systemic perspective*. Just as the coach works with an individual in the context of the whole person, the coach who works with a team coaches in the context of the whole system.

Systems theory. Systems theory was developed in the early 20th century by researchers in North America and Europe in an attempt to transcend the limitations of the prevailing reductionist approach in the natural sciences (Morgan, 2006). Notable early researchers of general systems theory include Ashby (1956), Beer, (1959/1967), Forrester (1958), and von Bertalanffy (1951). Systems theory was built upon over time in the 1990s (Senge, 1994) to include systems thinking as applied to organizations. According to this view, organizations were observed as complex, interconnected, open systems interacting with their environments through permeable boundaries. A core concept in systems theory is that the nature of a system's (organization's) existence relies on holism,

meaning that interdependence, feedback and feed-forward loops, and dynamic equilibrium are necessary for change, creativity, innovation, and thus survival. Another core concept is that within the system, the parts of the system dynamically interact and, together, are greater than the sum of the parts.

Daft (2007) synthesized the literature about systems and defined a system as "a set of interacting elements that acquires inputs from the environment, transforms them, and discharges outputs to the external environment" (p. 15). Organizations are considered complex open systems because, like organisms, they are open to and interact with their environment. Nothing in nature exists without being embedded within something else, whether it be an atom, a cell, a person, a team, an organization, a nation, or a plant.

Thus, a key principle of systems theory is that the system's survival depends on interaction with its environment. This means that continuous cycles of inputs and outputs are influenced by feedback loops. Interaction with and feedback from the environment influences and even co-shapes each other. In the simplest form, feedback is information that reflects the meaning of outcomes of an act or a series of acts by an individual, group, or organization. Systems theory emphasizes the importance of responding and adapting to feedback.

The idea of organizations as systems is not new. Neither is the idea that organizations are complex and rapidly changing. Emery and Trist (1965) concluded that "the environmental contexts in which organizations exists are themselves changing, at an increasing rate, and toward increasing complexity" (p. 21). Today, the challenges of the world continue to grow exponentially in terms of complexity, interconnection, and speed

of change. It is well known that 21st century organizations are facing a complex competitive landscape driven largely by globalization and the technological revolution. Given the complexity of doing business in today's increased global and technological environment, organizations need to act locally on the basis of broader goals, expectations, and intentions for the whole system in order to survive, let alone thrive in the long-term future (Stacey, 2011; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

More recently, complexity theory has been developed and applied to organizations. General systems theory and systems thinking are at the core of complexity theory. It is a concept that attempts to explain complex phenomenon not explainable by traditional mechanistic theories.

Application to human systems. Researchers have applied the concepts of systems and complexity to better understand human organizations, such as for understanding how they emerge, interact with other systems, change, learn, and adapt (Anderson, 1999; Cilliers, 2000; Marion, 1999; Stacey, 1995). No longer do the main challenges in organizations lie in the people or individual parts of the system, but in the interfaces and relationships between people, teams, functions, and different internal and external stakeholder needs. The nature of human relationships—including team interactions—are inherently non-linear and oftentimes unpredictable. Although a team may plan, it also needs to interact with, and adapt to, its environment, including the various interconnected parts of the larger and smaller system. Holland (1995) discusses micro-level dynamics interactions among individuals as the emergence of aggregates, or small informal groups. These aggregates form (emerge again) into larger aggregates, and so on. Thus, the organization is made up of both formal and informal systems.

A systems approach to organizations rests with alignments between different systems, understanding that constant non-linear change is driven by multiple invisible and influential feedback loops. Organizations have direct interactions with not only its internal environment such as employees, managers, teams, technology, and resources (Daft, 2007) but also interactions with its external environment such as customers, competitors, suppliers, and government agencies (Morgan, 2006). It is these collective and systemic aspects of the team and its context that can either enhance or undermine its performance.

Application to coaching teams. As an open, living organism, an organization is a social system comprised of interrelated subsystems. One such subsystem is a team. A team is influenced by the social environment in which it lives and interacts (Lewin, 1943, 1951; Senge, 1994). Huffington's (2007) review of the literature found that executive coaching is a subset of organizational consultancy that bears in mind the organization as the "third party to the wings" (p. 44), meaning the organization where the client works. Thus, she advocated a whole systems perspective that positions the work of the coach and client in contrast and in relation to the wider organizational context. The larger system substantially influences the client's actions and outcomes, whether the client is a team or an individual. When the coach pays attention to the larger system while coaching the client, the client cannot use coaching to turn away from the organization and avoid his or her relatedness to the organization. Rather, the coach helps the client face, and manage, its challenges. Huffington described this way of working with a client as a process consultancy approach (Schein, 1988) or a coach–consultant approach wherein organizational consulting and coaching are combined (Kilburg, 2002; Peltier, 2001).

Hawkins (2011) extended a systems perspective to leadership coaching. Similar to Hackman and Wageman (2005), Hawkins suggested that the focus of coaching a team is on the team's purpose, performance, and processes and secondarily on the interpersonal development of the team. Second, the focus of coaching is on the team's systemic context, helping them engage and relate to their various stakeholders in a way that leads to jointly transforming the larger business.

The systemic context of organizations has important implications for coaching practice, including the coaching of work teams. Several authors have discussed the implications of systems theory for coaches (Cavanagh, 2006; Kilburg, 1996; O'Neill, 2000; Peltier, 2001). Grant (2011a, 2011b) added that coaching clients is inherently and inextricably part of a larger system, such as the organizational context. The larger systems, in turn, substantially influence the client's actions and outcomes, whether the client is a team or an individual. Neglecting these systemic issues means ignoring the powerful and very real forces at work in the client's life. Grant concluded, for example, that coaching education should include training in general systems theory, organization change theory, as well as complexity theory so that coaching students will better understand groups and teams, their dynamics, the complexities of human systems, and the nature of change in complex adaptive systems.

Organizational learning theorists (e.g., Scharmer, 2007; Senge, 1994) place systemic awareness at the center of their learning models. In order to foster change and development, "it is critical that individuals and groups have a high level of systemic awareness and an understanding of organizations, and their various subgroups, as dynamic and complex systems" (Brown & Grant, 2010, p. 31). Morgan (2006) deepened

the understanding of organizations and advocated that in order for organizations to learn and change, members must be skilled in systems thinking (Senge, 1994). Systems thinking focuses on how the phenomenon being studied interacts with other elements of the system to produce certain behaviors. Rather than isolating small parts of the system as the focus of study, a systems-thinking approach takes into account larger numbers and types of interactions while studying the phenomenon.

Systems thinking (Senge, 1994) requires double-loop learning (Argyris, 1977) wherein underlying assumptions, metaphors, norms, and objectives are open to challenge. A systems thinking approach helps people see and think about organizational reality, using different templates and mental models to create new capacities through which organizations can extend their ability to create the future. For example, a coach can help the team identify and resolve conflicts between espoused and actual behaviors such as the team's and the organizations policies and practices. Thus, they are enabled to better understand, and change, from the standpoint of a new frame. By doing so, they can adjust internal operations to adapt to environmental changes and requirements.

These four perspectives are like different lenses, each having a different focus and a set of assumptions that lead to different perceptions and coaching choices. In turn, each perspective can yield different outcomes for the group. Although any one of these perspectives enables a reasonably adequate view of the group, one perspective alone is insufficient to explain all that needs to be explained about what is occurring in the group. Therefore, it is beneficial to understand all four perspectives about how groups function.