

Evolution of a Coach

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Background & Context

The International Coaching Week (May 18th – 24th) was an opportunity for the Mumbai Chapter to create visibility and understanding of coaching. Partnering with NGOs to create this visibility and understanding was a choice based on the vision of the chapter to impact the society as well.

One of our partner NGOs for the coaching week, requested for group coaching for their people across the hierarchy and functions. The partner NGO specified the following areas that their internal groups required coaching on: Leadership style; Teamwork & Collaboration; and Alignment with Vision & Strategy. The CEO had expressed the following desired outcomes for his team:

- to be able to think for themselves: to be empowered
- shift from not-for-profit mindset to Organizational mindset
- think about the implications of Scale & Growth (given their growth targets).

We conducted 5 group sessions spread over 3 days. The first group coaching session was lead by a seasoned coach as a demonstration for the other coaches to learn. For the remaining group sessions, the presence of the seasoned coach was invaluable as the knowledge, art and skill of group coaching was generously shared by leading it from the front. Having observed the first session, it seemed easy. What really enabled the learning of other coaches was the feeling of being supported and given the space to practice, make our mistakes and learn!

This article shares the learnings' through personal experiences from the coaching week project and group coaching.

The Coaching Week Project

Being entrusted with the responsibility of planning and executing the coaching week, gave rise to self-doubt on whether I would be able to make it successful in all aspects. I was lucky that I got coached constantly which helped me manage the project well and I also had a supportive team member.

My Learnings

Coaching helped me focus on my strengths that I needed to leverage and the behaviors that needed to be changed & sustained to carry out this responsibility. What also helped was that I had the security of knowing that I could make mistakes and my team would support me. The biggest learning for me was to plan my work on a daily basis and stick to a schedule, acknowledge myself and let go of certain tasks by trusting others to do their bit. As a coach I learnt to look at possibilities and look forward. The sense of empowerment that I gained through this phase is what I am now able to bring and enable in the coaching conversations.

Group Coaching

Needs Identification and Design

I have been a consultant for close to 20 years and the focus has been to enable or co-create solutions in a collaborative manner with organizations. The space that I operate from is that of a Subject Matter Expert (SME). Execution of consulting initiatives involves facilitated workshops. After much deliberation, the design of these workshops evolves. The design may include exercises, discussion questions etc. Each session of the workshop has a clear objective, defined approach, what should be the learning, debrief with a planned timeline. The outcomes are expressed by the organization and are kept in mind while designing each session.

To use an oxymoron, Group Coaching is very differently similar to Facilitated Workshops!

The start point for a Group Coaching Session is also the same as Facilitation, where an understanding of the need by the organization is used to design the framework. This design is rather loosely structured and concise keeping the outcome as a North Star. The design has themes or dimensions of the outcome desired which are only indicative to enable the group to have discussions. The entire process is 'real time' with no exercises or simulations. The coach is a catalyst to the process of self discovery and does not get entangled in the content yet staying focused on the underlying emotions & beliefs. The coach works with the client's desired outcome but is not limited by the same.

Example: the design followed the powerful process of acknowledgements, their views on what will enable them to achieve their goals under the given topic (teamwork, leadership style etc), and introspect on the change required as an ecosystem and as an individual.

My first stumbling block was the realization that I should not get attached to the design too much, as I kept getting caught in the structure of the design rather than being able to '*be present and in the moment.*' The process of unlearning and learning to be present happened over 2 sessions.

Process

In a Facilitated Workshop scenario, the Facilitator operates from the space of an expert, keenly focused on the outcome and also influencing the process to move towards the desired outcome. The control of the process remains covertly with the facilitator. The facilitator plays the role of an enabler and catalyst with many other hues such as, participant and expert by means of sharing own perspectives on the topic or agenda. The outcome that the organization has identified is what the facilitator follows very strongly in term of facilitation.

On the other hand the Coach does not operate from a space of an expert or controller. In fact the group is the expert and the ownership of the outcome does not rest with the coach! Although there is a north star with respect to the outcome; the beliefs that are brought up comprise the universe of the process in reaching the outcome. Thus the approach is 'real time' which means that the oft repeated phrase that coaches are taught of 'dancing in the moment' was evident in the process.

Operating from a space of less experience in group coaching, there were certain challenges that I experienced in the process as given below.

- To be mindful of the overall objective

The thoughts being shared are real time and there are many people sharing their thoughts. This was taken care of in the process by being open to all thoughts shared, without dismissing any of them but highlighting them in the context of the overall objective of the group coaching and allowing for the individual to make a choice, decision or look at new perspectives & possibilities in that reflective moment in time.

- To include everyone

Unlike a Facilitated Workshop, group coaching moves at the pace of the group to include everyone's perspective. Thus the ability to *listen deeply*, *direct communication* and to *ask powerful questions*, are all at play. *Building rapport* and *coaching presence* becomes so very important as people need to feel that this is a safe space for them be able to share their candid views although we had assured the group of *confidentiality* in the beginning of the process. Thus we started the group coaching process with acknowledging self and each other to create the mindset and operating context for the group.

- Working on individual specific issues

This can be a real challenge and for some of us learner coaches, skepticism was high, as we were unsure if this would work in a group scenario where conversations were happening in real-time amongst team members. Let me share some situations with you and how it was handled.

- One team member raised a specific concern whether the qualification that the individual has earned would be used in the current role. On probing further and further, the realization was that the person still made the choice to join the organization knowing that the educational background and role expectations were different. Asking provocative questions brought commitment to have a discussion with the relevant stakeholders to see how the educational background could be leveraged in the organization. This one to one in a group setting helped the individual realize where one was operating from, what are the possibilities that exist and what should be the next steps. Although it was a personal issue discussed in the group, however the space was given to continue the conversation offline, protecting the confidentiality of the individual.
- I observed that:
 - The context of the overall group coaching session topic was never lost. The impact of individual perspective, beliefs on the rate and quality of growth for the organization was abundantly clear.
 - The person was always given space to decide if they would like to discuss in the group or offline
 - It provided for a lot of cross learning and clarity of perspective within others in the group. What this conversation sent out as a signal to others was, to look at what would they like to do and how can they try and make it a possibility in the current context.
- Another situation was when a participant further into the discussion shared there was no need to be 'excellent' in any particular area, i.e., there is no need to be a specialist. On questioning

further the emotion that came up was a feeling of not being appreciated or recognized for the work done. Deeper questioning helped the individual to introspect “do I give it my 100% or do I limit myself?” “Do I try to understand what is expected of me?” This helped the individual to do some self-exploration. Despite being individual specific, it enabled the group to reflect on what are they contributing to the growth of the organization.

- In the group coaching session on leadership style the entire top management team participated. The conversation was direct and forward moving and one of the participants questioned his personal motivation and commitment in the job and then expressed that he would like to leave the organization. The CEO was rather taken aback and offered to discuss this offline. The group discussed as to what can they do for the organization, understanding and appreciating that they are a team and how can help each other and contribute to enable growth.
- This simple acknowledgement of differences in perspective, emboldened people to start voicing their ideas, challenges gave “aha moments” of learning and validated the process.

Skills required for Group Coaching

Asking tough questions simply and direct is a skill & an art. The corner stone of group coaching is the skill in questioning, while being inclusive and focused, which without the ability to listen actively in the moment is meaningless. Direct questioning, without being disrespectful nor confrontational is in my point of view an ability which coaches are able to exhibit by shifting their perspective of ‘who is responsible for the outcome’ and ‘wanting to please’. This is pretty much akin to the syndrome of a trainer who is the hero & well liked and acknowledged at all times. What I learnt was things move faster and more productively if you pick up the unsaid or the underlying and table it with permission in front of the coachee.

- One very enthusiastic participant who loved his work shared that he was de-motivated with almost 90% of his ideas being rejected. By asking him what made 10% of his ideas get accepted, helped him change his perspective from focusing on his failures to looking at successes.
- Another participant kept saying how certain kind of publicity events were never done by the organization which could have a large impact. When asked what the individual done to create an understanding of the events and their impact internally, several possibilities started emerging for him and the main gap identified was lack of communication.

Conclusion

When I started writing this piece I did not envisage that I had experienced so many learnings. The most important realization I had and am increasingly believe in strongly is that *to be a good coach you need to be self-aware*. The self-awareness is about knowing yourself, where you operate from, where you want to go, what you want to put out there and most importantly being open to learn. I had no hesitation in saying I don’t know and that has helped me be open to learning from every interaction and every situation. I am sharing my experience and learning because I believe that, it will help others to learn and *be open to learning*. This for me is the fulcrum of evolution of an individual; the willingness to look at possibilities. Thus for me, *growing as an individual is what helps you evolve as a coach*. As a coach, I am glad that my evolution is on the path now but as the poet Robert Frost writes, “.....and I have miles to go before I sleep.



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Since 1994, I have been consulting & building expertise in the People Management area with focus on *Change Management* and *Organizational Development*. I began my career with Eicher Consultancy Services, in the areas of Business Strategy and Total Quality Management Consulting. I have also worked with British Oxygen Company (Linde Group), heading the Performance Management and Learning & Development function. I am an accredited *Professional Certified Coach* from ICF and am an *MBA* from Clark University, Massachusetts, USA. Since 2006 I have been coaching individuals from the corporate sector and individuals from different walks of life and have over 800 hours of coaching. I enable clients to manage ‘Transitions’ – personal or professional.

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