# A FIELD GUIDE FOR CREATING TEAMING AGREEMENTS

# WHAT TEAM COACHING IS AND IS NOT

By Janet M. Harvey

Organizations that seek to explore new areas—markets, technologies, processes—often look to collaborative teams to develop creative responses. Organizational leaders who commission teams often place great hope in the promise of synergy, that a team will fulfill the folk wisdom that promises: "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." There is evidence (Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010) that some teams do exhibit "collective intelligence" greater than the general intelligence of its members.

Reliance on teams introduces new complexities into organizational life. Leaders with many teams reporting to them can see the scope of outcomes under their management triple or even quadruple. Self-governing teams can alleviate this stress, but the centuries-old command and control governance model produces leaders— potential team members—who have been rewarded for taking personal accountability for producing results rather than sharing accountability with a team of peers.

Tension arises in teams when the needs of individuals conflict with the needs of the team. This tension generates undesirable behavior that impedes progress and can spill over into the organizational culture, affecting morale and other indicators of organizational health.

From the first moment of engagement, a skilled team coach recognizes the team as whole—resourceful, capable, and creative—even if team members are not acting as a cohesive team. Over the course of a coaching engagement, the focus on the team as client calls forth from team members their best collaborative behavior and returns them to the organization with greater emotional and social intelligence and increased self-awareness. .

## TEAM COACHING: DEVELOPING THE ONE-TO-MANY RELATIONSHIP

Demand for team coaches is on the rise, and many one-on-one coaches now feel drawn to become team coaches. This is a noble aspiration, and team coaching is a highly rewarding vocation. It is a mistake, however, to think that a one-on-one coach can perform proficiently in a team coaching role without training and practice beyond basic International Coaching Federation (ICF) certification.

Developing the one-to-many relationship with a team requires a thorough understanding of group dynamics. A team coach must also have a deep appreciation for unconscious assumptions, habits, and biases and how these manifests as behavior in a team setting.

| **Table 31.2** Anatomy of a Team Coaching Engagement | |
|---|---|
| **Sponsor Relationship** | **Member Relationship** |
| • Identify perceived need<br>• Conduct culture discovery<br>• Negotiate conditions of satisfaction/success for the group results | • Identify perceived strengths<br>• Determine what is visible to the members of the team<br>• Discover operating paradox |
| **Contracting** | **Coaching** |
| • Analyze the current situation<br>• Match gaps to services<br>• Negotiate an ROI/ROE formula | • Generate and sustain a visible, empowering field<br>• Champion, challenge, and co-create |
| **Measuring Success** | **Celebrating** |
| • Establish baseline measures for key business issues<br>• Collect data<br>• Affirm ROI/ROE effect | • Harvest behaviors developed and observable impact<br>• Acknowledge member contribution to conditions of satisfaction/success |
| Source: inviteCHANGE Advanced Group & Team Coaching Program, ICF Accredited. | |

## TEAM FORMATION

In an ideal coaching engagement, the organizational sponsor of a new team will bring in the coach to participate in the team's formation. Research on senior leadership teams (Wageman, 2015) found that upfront planning is a critical success factor. The team will be more likely to achieve its goals if the sponsor addresses the following design questions:

1. Is there a well-defined problem (or opportunity) worthy of allocating organizational resources to?
2. Who are the people with the expertise and collaborative skills to solve the problem (or capitalize on the opportunity)?
3. Is a collaborative approach the best approach?

If the answers to these questions are satisfactory, the sponsor convenes a team and grants it authority with clear boundaries based on the organizational purpose it is called to fulfill. Wageman's research also recognizes that turnover impedes team performance. For project teams to be most effective, it is important for all team members to commit to sticking with the team until its mission is achieved. For intact teams, that is, those that serve as ongoing organizational units, research suggests that a tenure of at least 3 years is optimal.

## TEAMING AGREEMENTS ARE CRUCIAL

Research supports the long-standing consensus among coaches that working agreements, or norms, are crucial to a team's success. Team members' assumptions about competence, autonomy, and belonging influence their behavior in a group setting (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Such assumptions are often unconscious and manifest as unhelpful behaviors that endanger the collective sense of safety and trust, impeding collaborative work. Working agreements can prevent a team from getting stuck and will guide participants out of predicaments that inevitably arise. According to Ruth Wageman's research (Wageman, Nunes, Buruss & Hackman, 2008), "Norms for acceptable behavior are the single most important differentiator for superior teams."

Typically, before a team begins its work in earnest, it gathers for a session with the coach to agree about how team members will relate to each other and the coach. The coach sets the tone by encouraging participants to talk directly to each other, to listen, and be open about personal beliefs and assumptions. Because the team is the client, the coach is free to challenge the assumptions, biases, and preferences about power, decision making, and task assignments that arise.

The coach convenes the first session with four purposefully simple questions:

1. What brought you here?
2. What is your team expected to deliver?
3. What agreements will support you to accept responsibility for the outcomes you are expected to deliver?
4. What approach to delivering the outcomes expected of you will honor your agreements?

The process of discussing these questions and creating working agreements transfers authority clearly to the team. When the working agreements are in place, each team member commits to abide by them.

Over the course of this session, the coach will make sure the team identifies the primary business issues and opportunities it will address and any known threats that may impede their work. This conversation also supports the team to begin to remove any invisible barriers that may prevent the collective from exercising emo- tional and social intelligence in their work together.

### The Coach Stakes Out the High Ground

Working agreements are intended to create the psychological safety that every participant needs to be able to participate authentically and spontaneously. When a team first comes together, however, members will stray often from the team norms, and the team won't yet have the collective awareness to notice each other's unhelpful behavior. It falls to the coach to set a positive tone for all the team's conversations and to remain solution-focused—especially when conflicts between team members arise. Table 31.3 shows the types of support all need.particip ants Until team members learn to encourage each other and express approval for diverse points of view, the coach provides emotional support to model it for the team.

## Working Agreements Guide Coach and Team

The coach brings the team back to its working agreements throughout the coaching engagement, inviting team members to celebrate when they are abiding by their agreements—especially when their observation of the agreements has allowed something new to emerge—and reminding them to notice when they are dropping back into old behaviors. Continually bringing the team back to its working agreements is the most powerful intervention at the coach's disposal.

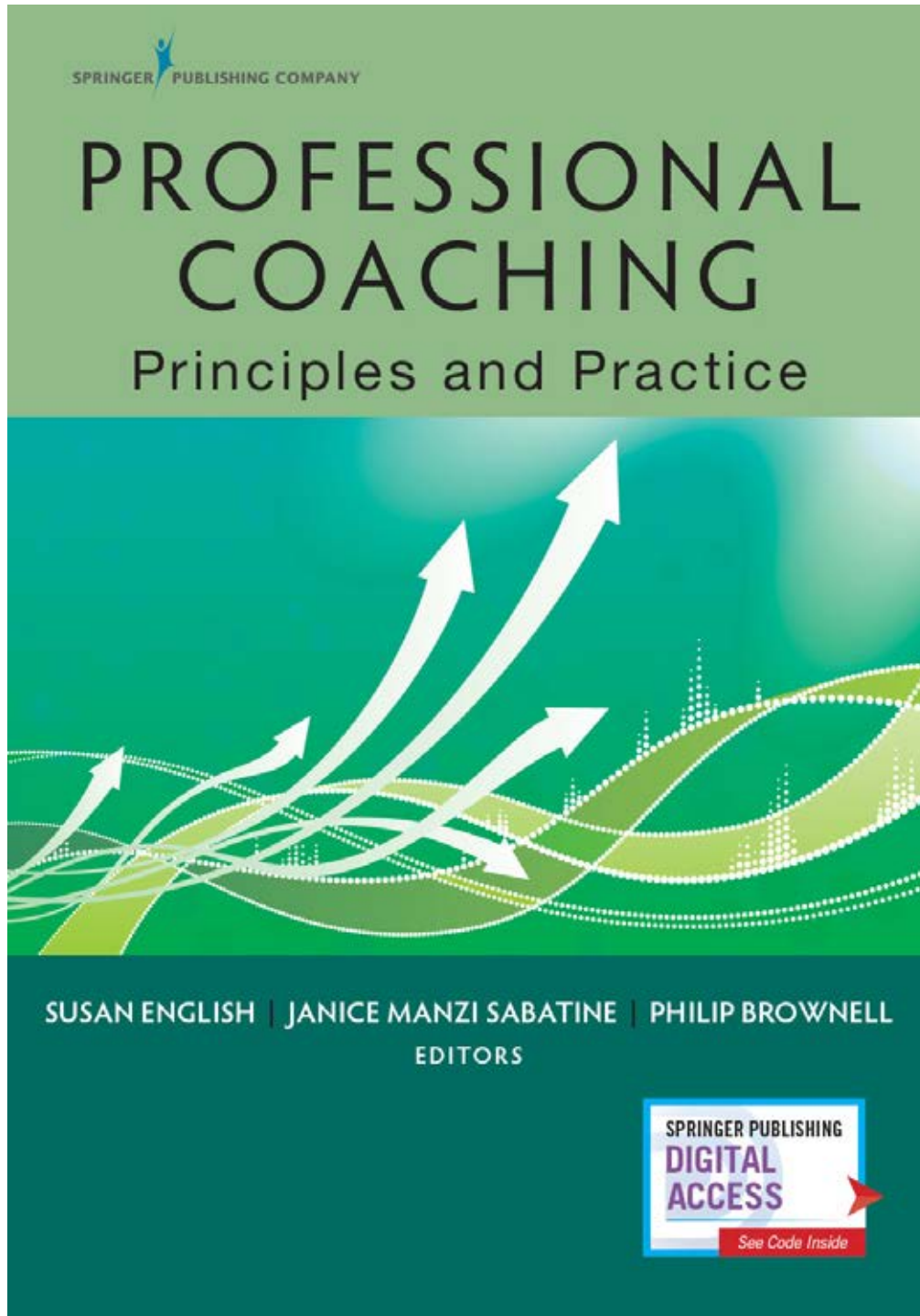| **Table 31.3** Support Types Essential to Healthy Team Dynamics | |
|---|---|
| **Support Type** | **Behavior Observed** |
| Belonging | Expressing acceptance and approval; demonstrating belonging to the group |
| Emotional | Rewarding and encouraging others; listening to problems and shared feelings |
| Informational | Giving ideas, advice and suggestions; explaining and demonstrating how to perform a task |
| Task | Helping another work with tasks; providing supportive actions |
| Source: Forsyth, D. (1999). Group dynamics (3rd ed.) Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning. | |

Working agreements sometimes change over time. When a team is formed, individuals bring concerns about personal safety—conscious or unconscious—to the discussion about working agreements. After a team has worked to create safety and build trust, team members begin to shift their focus from themselves to the team. When this happens, team members allow each other to be more provocative and more alert to opportunities to push the edges of their collective comfort zone. New creative energies arise from this shift. As this occurs, the coach challenges the team members to adopt agreements that will support increased social and emotional intelligence in the team dynamic.

**This document is an excerpt from Chapter 30 in the book: Professional Coaching: Principles and Practice.**

SPRINGER PUBLISHING COMPANY

# PROFESSIONAL COACHING
## Principles and Practice

SUSAN ENGLISH | JANICE MANZI SABATINE | PHILIP BROWNELL

EDITORS

SPRINGER PUBLISHING
DIGITAL ACCESS
See Code Inside

Click on image to purchase