

WHEN NOT TO COACH A TEAM

Just as happened with coaching individuals, as team coaching becomes more mainstream, the assumption emerges that it is some kind of cure-all for team problems. Of course, it's not, but team coaches increasingly bring to supervision issues relating to how they manage client team and sponsor expectations about what can and can't be delivered.

It all starts with getting to know the team and its situation before contracting with them. Experienced team coaches know the danger signs to look for and when they should say no to an assignment. Here are some of those signs:

1. When there is no compelling rationale for being a team – for example, when members of a group have little interdependence
2. When it is too large to be a real team – above eight, it will become harder to gel as a team; above 12, social loafing and other dynamics will be a major impediment to performance
3. When only the leader wants team coaching to happen
4. When the team leader is weak – for example, unable to deal with dissension. In such circumstances, the team coach can easily find themselves in the role of surrogate leader
5. When the team expects you to rescue them, or for you to find the solutions to their problems instead of working things out themselves. If they won't take responsibility for the process or the outcomes, you are liable to become the scapegoat when things don't work out
6. When the team has no prospect of acquiring the resources it needs to succeed
7. When you are a stakeholder in the team – any real or potential conflict of interest can undermine your effectiveness
8. When you have close relationships with some members of the team, but not with others
9. When the team's problems are pathological – deeply unhealthy teams will find it impossible to engage with the team coaching process.

The initial scoping interviews with members of the team provide the opportunity to identify potential red flags. Interviews with key stakeholders and observers of the team provide another, valuable perspective.

If you find a red flag, explore your concerns first with the team leader and the assignment sponsor. If they are not prepared to acknowledge the issue(s) and work with you on them before the formal coaching begins, then walk away. If they will not let you take the issue to the rest of the team, individually or collectively, walk away. If you feel that the complexity of the problem is beyond your competence, walk away. In each case, if you explain clearly the reasons for your concern, you are likely to emerge with greater respect and self-respect than if you take on an assignment that has failure built-in!

Once you start a team coaching assignment, keep your eyes open for signs that the team may be uncoachable in its current form and be prepared to confront the team with your observations. "This is my observation. What do you want together to do about it?" Recontract regularly and reiterate the limitations of team coaching, where appropriate.

If you do find yourself coaching an uncoachable team, don't panic. It happens to all experienced team coaches at some time. Think of it as an occupational hazard of the role—like a sports injury is for an athlete! Extract yourself as soon as you can, and put some quality time into reflecting on the learning you can extract from the experience.