



Team Coaching For Company Success

A step-by-step look at building team alignment and coaching diverse groups of people to take action and reach their full potential.

By Val Williams

When we think of team coaching, most of us think of sports. A coach helps a team of athletes win games and go to the Super Bowl, Final Four or the World Series. Team coaching is very similar. Executive coaches work with teams of executives and/or managers to produce great results: more revenue, greater productivity, and larger profit.

The International Coach Federation (ICF), the premier professional organization for coaches, defines coaching in the following way:

“Professional Coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their

lives, careers, businesses, or organizations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life. Coaching accelerates the client’s progress by providing greater focus and awareness of choice. The interaction creates clarity and moves the client into action.”

As an Executive Coach for the past eight years, I have had the pleasure of coaching teams of corporate executives in a variety of companies to overcome obstacles and reach their organizational goals. As the ICF definition notes, my job as the coach is to help team members focus more clearly, make more deliberate choices, clarify perspectives, and take action.

Benefits Of Team Coaching

What I've learned from working with my clients is that there are many types of business situations that are improved by team coaching. However, there are some criteria that determine how successful team coaching will be.

For example, I coached the management team of a large East coast financial services company. The team included a very strong CEO and eight vice presidents of different functional areas. Since the CEO was new, he had just hired about half of his direct reports. The company was already profitable but was about to grow significantly. I was brought in by the CEO to help him: 1) Create a strategic plan for the next three to five years, 2) Build a cohesive, strong management team, and 3) Encourage ongoing development of leadership skills for his managers and their direct reports.

Over the next eighteen months, I met with the team in various formats most often in half-day or full-day team coaching sessions where we worked on clarifying the strategic plan. In addition, I coached some members of the team individually on their specific leadership goals, in person or by telephone. At other times, I coached the next level down. For example, one of the vice presidents had me coach his direct reports on team building skills in a full-day team coaching session.

Team coaching was done from several different entry points in different formats. As the coach, my goals were always to work with team members to:

- **Build team alignment around the company strategy;**
- **Build the leadership skills to carry out the strategy; and**
- **Request actions that produced results.**

The outcome was that the company did grow successfully. The strategy was implemented. And, the company continued to be profitable.

It was a very rewarding experience for me as a coach. I also learned the criteria that make team coaching successful:

- *Full support and leadership from the CEO.*

We met before sessions, and his full participation in the sessions was critical to the success of coaching.

- *Reinforcement of team coaching using individual coaching.*

The company realized it was important for the executives to have individual coaching to handle their specific goals and challenges. It made them better team members.

- *Long-term commitment.*

The CEO and executive team remained enthusiastic throughout the one-year project.

- *Skills of the coach.*

The skills I used most included listening, questioning, team building, and group alignment.

With the above conditions in place, team coaching works well to improve an organization's overall performance.

What Team Coaching Looks Like

There are as many ways to do team coaching as there are coaches and teams. This is because much of what happens in coaching has to be customized to the specific team and their challenges. However, there are some practical strategies that most successful team coaching projects have in common.

Through coaching many teams in different industries, I developed a 7-Step Model: "Dual Track Team Coaching Model" that is practical, simple, and works well. The idea is to coach the entire team together while also coaching the leader and the team members individually. This way, the coach gets two different levels of insight into the team. One insight is how they function together as a group in terms of group dynamics, levels of alignment, and group issues. The second track, individual coaching, allows the coach to see the individual dynamics that play into the group dynamics. It is a fascinating double view of a team, and only the coach is in this unique position to facilitate outcomes.

Sample Case

I worked with the operations division of a national financial services company based in the Midwest. The operations division was responsible for customer service, administering contracts, and several other administrative functions to support customers. There was a large volume of work, a fast pace, and lots of change as the

company adapted to market conditions.

Initially, the Senior Vice President of Operations hired me to coach her individually. However, it soon became clear that her team could move forward faster if the whole team were coached. We used the 7-Step Dual Track Team Coaching Model. The steps are outlined in detail here.

Step 1: Clarify Team Leader Goals

In my individual coaching with the Senior Vice President, we worked on her goals including:

1. **Lead through influence vs. authority**
2. **Develop and empower staff**
3. **Manage conflict between team members**
4. **Be known as an outstanding operations function**

Our coaching focused on these goals by using her experiences with the team. For example, when she prepared for a staff meeting, we would look at what she could do at the meeting to deliberately empower or influence the staff to higher performance.

Dual Track Team Coaching Model (7 Steps)

Step 1.

Clarify Team Leader Goals

Step 2.

Clarify Team Vision

Step 3.

Clarify Team Members' Roles and Goals in Team Vision

- *Each individual role*

Step 4.

Identify Team Obstacles

- *Individual obstacles*

- *Team obstacles*

Step 5.

Co-Create Team Strategies

- *Individual strategies*

- *Team strategies*

Step 6.

Hold Team Accountable For Action/Implementation

- *Individual actions*

- *Team actions*

Step 7.

Debrief/Reevaluate

- *Return to Step 1*

- *Repeat circular model*

Step 2: Clarify Team Vision

I met with the senior vice president's direct reports for a full-day on site. In this team coaching session, we brainstormed the team vision. I coached the team to come up with a short statement in plain words that described their desired result which was what outstanding customer service would look like.

Step 3: Clarify Team Members' Roles and Goals in Team Vision

Step 3 happened both in the all-day team coaching session and also later in the individual coaching sessions. During the team sessions, I asked each team member to start identifying how his or her specific function supported the overall goal. For example, questions for the vice president of communications were:

- "How does my role in Communications contribute to the team vision of outstanding customer service?"
- "How can my role in Communications help the team overcome some of the obstacles we identified?"

In my coaching sessions with each team member, they identified their individual goals, obstacles, and strategies to overcome obstacles.

Step 4: Identify Team Obstacles and Step 5: Co-Create Team Strategies

In the same all-day team coaching session, we discussed the obstacles to the team's vision of outstanding customer service:

- Better cross functional communication
- More cross training of staff
- Technology improvements
- Quicker decision making at the top

We then brainstormed strategies for overcoming the obstacles. My job was to ask provocative questions and facilitate the team creating answers. Typical team coaching questions included:

- "What could you, as a team, do to communicate better?"
- "Who has to do what to speed up decision making?"
- "Who will take the lead?"
- "How can the team overcome that obstacle?"

Together, we created strategies and action plans.

Step 6: Hold Team Accountable for Action and Step 7: Debrief/Reevaluate

Again, the coach is on a dual track. In my individual sessions with the vice presidents and the leader, I held each one accountable for their individual promises.

In addition, we arranged team coaching calls to check in on where they were with team performance. We focused on progress and results, reevaluated strategies, and made new plans.

We scheduled 60-90 minute team coaching calls for every couple of weeks after the all-day team coaching session. Everyone could call in from wherever they were. This allowed the team coaching to continue.

Challenges Of Team Coaching

Despite the operations team's great progress and the leaders' happiness with their accomplishments, there were some challenges in the process.

For example, some of the team members were in conflict with each other. This turned into a challenge for me as the Coach since confidentiality comes to the forefront.

One of the vice presidents (let's call her Alice) was very dominant in the team. She was results-oriented, so she tended to volunteer to lead projects and pushed for deadlines and deliverables. Another vice president (let's call her Barbara) was also interested in results but had a much more thoughtful, analytical style and felt it was important to discuss the process fully before going into action.

In the team coaching sessions, Alice and Barbara often disagreed. Alice usually won the argument by sheer force of personality. In our individual coaching sessions, Barbara complained to me about feeling "railroaded" by Alice. Meanwhile, Alice in her individual coaching sessions complained that she felt Barbara was passively working against her.

As the coach, I encouraged each of them to see which part of the conflict was their

responsibility. I also challenged each of them to remember they are leaders and not victims. Much of the coaching was asking them to consider new perspectives about the other team member. I could not reveal to either of them what the other had said to me. In the end, both Barbara and Alice did shift. They never became best friends, but they did resolve the conflict.

Another challenge of team coaching is when one team member is not in alignment. In the operations division, one of the vice presidents (let's call him Ken) felt unsupported by the rest of the team. He felt that his particular group's function was not appreciated, and he was not being kept informed by his peers. Therefore, he wasn't really a team player, preferring to just do his job and be left alone.

In my individual coaching with Ken, we looked at ideas for how he could better advertise the accomplishments of his group, so that other team members could understand how his group added value. We also had some candid conversations about Ken's need to decide if he was going to really join the team. If so, he would have to make specific requests of his peers on what he needed. And, his own behavior would have to change. Interestingly, Ken had issues with the leader, so the individual coaching also focused on "managing up."

In the end, Ken decided to leave the team. The team continued on, and Ken's group was reassigned to another vice president. Although this was disruptive to the team in the short term, in the long term it was better to have team members who were fully committed to the team. And, Ken was happier in a new assignment.

In summary, team coaching has tremendous benefits for building team alignment and achieving team goals. The coach must stay attuned to the many challenges of team coaching. The team leader and members have to participate fully. With all of these elements in place, team coaching is an excellent strategy for organizational success. ★

ABOUT THE EXPERT: Val Williams

Trained as a professional coach, Val has been in private practice for the past several years. Her experience includes several years as a Managed Health Care Executive at Prudential Insurance, managing staffs as large as 700 people. Val has managed an annual operating budget of over 25 million dollars with direct impact on a network of 500,000 insured patients and 8,000 physicians and hospital providers.

