



Building a High- Performance Culture:

Group Coaching as a Leadership Development Tool

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Every leader wants a high-functioning team.

On a high-functioning team, the members are highly engaged. They distribute tasks so as to build on each other's strengths, generate ideas and find creative solutions in a spirit of collaboration, synergy, and a conviction that "all of us is better than one of us." Together, they achieve the common goal – whatever that goal may be.

The belief is that such a team makes the most of the talent around the table and creates better results. It's energizing, it's inspiring, and it's efficient. It's also good for business. Good teamwork is credited for a host of positive outcomes, among them productivity, performance, client satisfaction, and strategic alignment.

But how does one get such a team? If you look around your own team and see a loose collection of individuals, heads down in their offices, focused on their personal agendas, you're not alone. A high-functioning team is not easy to build. But it can be done.

In this article, I will share the experience of one leader who set the goal of a building a high functioning team in his organization. I will describe the steps we took to get there and the results. This leader's story can be a blueprint for any leader who wants to develop that ideal vision of the high functioning team.

"Before:" A Loose Collection of Individuals

Scott Barnard is the CFO of a large resort company, referred to here as LHN, overseeing the center of accounting and finance for the company worldwide. A fairly new entity, his department is part of a new model at the company to improve efficiency and create better corporate alignment.

Barnard's leadership team consists of twelve Executive Directors and Vice Presidents, each of whom oversees a department of their own. Effective in their own roles, he saw their capacity for leadership, and he also saw room for growth. How could he provide a learning experience for them, he wondered, that would be cost-effective, consistent from one leader to the other, and yet also customized to the needs of each individual? "My goal has always been to empower leaders to use their talents to their fullest while offering opportunities to continually grow within their role as well as prepare for new roles as their careers progress," said Barnard when he described his intention for the program.

At the Leadership Research Institute, a long-time partner of the company and a strong supporter of their feedback-based culture, we had some ideas. Barnard and I – an executive coach from the Leadership Research Institute working with his group - put our heads together and came up with one approach that would help Barnard develop his team: the Executive Coaching Group.

Barnard knew from prior experience that executive coaching could help in the development of individual leaders. Now he wondered if it could also be used for a group. We thought we'd try it out.

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Our goal for the Executive Coaching Group was three-fold:

- To enhance effectiveness;
- To improve leadership skills; and
- To strengthen the capacity for ongoing development.

We gathered together the twelve leaders. In our first meeting as they gathered together, the room was largely quiet. The leaders looked either down at their notes, or up at me. There was a sense of waiting.

After introducing myself, I tried opening them up. I asked questions. They sat still. Some answered politely.

I tried putting them in pairs. They were uncomfortable.

I moved them into groups. Less comfortable still.

While it was clear the people in the room liked each other, it wasn't clear they actually knew each other, or even that knowing each other really mattered. They were happy enough to meet and talk, and even to do what I asked, but the environment lacked a feeling of purpose.

Knowing the richness of expertise in the room and Barnard's appreciation for each member of the group, I knew we could do better. It was clear each member was doing a fine job with their department. What they weren't doing was leveraging each other. They weren't capitalizing on the diversity in the group, learning together, or aligning to business goals...yet.

The Executive Coaching Group set out to change that.

The Executive Coaching Group Model

The Executive Coaching Group was developed partly by design and partly through evolution. In hindsight, several elements of the model proved to be effective over time.

Individual Leadership Development

To acknowledge a core strength at LHN, it is a reflective environment. The Executive Coaching Group was able to build on existing resources and add in new components to strengthen those opportunities even more.

360-Degree Feedback, Surveys and Data

LHN leaders sponsor ongoing rounds of 360-degree feedback for multiple levels of employees, and employee engagement surveys are routine. Many of these efforts are facilitated by the Leadership Research Institute, making a partnership to implement the Executive Coaching Group a natural fit.

In addition, Barnard's group did their own self-surveying to ensure they were delivering on key variables and building capacity from top to bottom.

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Action Plans

Building on all that data was a central aspect of the Executive Coaching Group at LHN. We began the work of the Executive Coaching Group with each individual's 360. Each member of the group met to assess their data and answer three questions:

1. What are the strengths you can build on to improve your leadership?
2. Where are your opportunities for improvement?
3. What goal do you want to set now?

The resulting Action Plan gave each individual leader a focus for ongoing coaching sessions, one-on-one, throughout the year.

This element of the Executive Coaching Group served an important purpose. It made the experience entirely customized, at least on one level, for every member of the group. The Action Plans were as unique as the members of the group themselves, and their focus areas ran the gamut. A sampling of the areas in which they wanted to improve included:

1. Being more strategic and less tactical in day-to-day work;
2. Bridging strong relationships with business partners;
3. Improving employee engagement;
4. Change management;
5. Delegating more effectively to focus on strategic priorities.

In this way, individual leaders were able to get support and drive toward growth in the area that mattered most to them, and where the payoff for improvement would affect them personally and contribute to the success of the organization.

Executive Coaching

The cornerstone of the Executive Coaching Group was customized, individual coaching. Members used this opportunity to determine what would be most impactful for them in improving their leadership for their specific goals and at that specific time. The intensive nature of coaching gave members the opportunity to make big strides on their goals, assess their own progress, and bring together information from multiple sources (their feedback, their departmental data, their jobs, their experiences, their goals) to focus their attention and ensure their progress as leaders over time.

Group Leadership Development

Despite the variety of individual areas for improvement, a cursory look at the collective data and a few months' experience with the group revealed common themes.

In the first group meeting, it became apparent that the members weren't sure how to best coach each other, which indicated they also weren't sure how to coach their direct reports.

In the second group meeting, it became apparent they would benefit from some of the skills of group collaboration, like strong listening skills and the ability to support others in thinking through their own solutions.

Before long, we had developed a year's worth of curriculum: four to six topics in the areas of leadership and management that could shore up their capacity as individuals, and more importantly, that would strengthen their leadership capacity as a group. Since this group of leaders comprised the entire leadership team of Finance Shared Services, the discovery of common themes for leadership development was a turning point. The members realized that if they could learn together, they could lead more consistently and affect the culture of the entire department.

I realized they could also affect the culture in the room. Indeed, with each group meeting, the members were becoming more and more comfortable learning new topics together, interacting as they processed the information, and starting to coach each other to be successful.

Team Leadership Development

For the better part of a year, the Executive Coaching Group met in this fashion – alternating individual executive coaching with group leadership development workshops to strengthen their skills.

But something else was happening alongside. The group was starting to gel. It was becoming a team.

Several elements taking place behind the scenes served to encourage this evolution.

- *Peer Coaching.* In part out of a commitment to cost-effectiveness, in part to build flexibility into the program for these time-strapped leaders, and in part to build a stronger infrastructure for the team, Peer Coaching was introduced early on in the process. Members of the group met in pairs at least once a month to apply the information learned in the group settings to their Action Plans and work through the challenges and opportunities that arose.
- *360 Lunches.* On their own, the members of the Executive Coaching Group also started meeting together. In monthly meetings they dubbed "360 Lunches," they got together to talk about common issues and find solutions together.
- *Ongoing Progress Reports.* Quarterly progress reports to Barnard based on formal and informal data gathered from the group provided directional guidance to keep the group on track.

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- *Integration with Ongoing Initiatives.* In the case of LHN, the integration of the employee engagement survey, ongoing 360s, and department-specific surveys with the Executive Coaching Group's focus on individual and group learning helped create a cohesive, future-focused sense of momentum.
- *Involvement in the Process.* Although the structure of the group was designed for the members, and the content of the learning was provided, the members themselves had a hand in determining what and how they would learn. Periodically throughout the year, we would take a time out from business as usual and ask ourselves:
 - How do we like the direction of Executive Coaching Group?
 - Is it effective? Is it not effective?
 - What should we change, or what do we want to do next?

This process allowed members to develop a sense of ownership over their own learning.

The pieces of the program that led toward the development of a team turned out to be essential. They provided continuity from month to month and provided direction, data, and a developing sense of togetherness that underlies any high-functioning team.

The Results: The Executive Coaching Group ROI

Any leadership development program is only as good as its results, and the Executive Coaching Group was no exception.

From the Data

A survey of the members revealed:

- 94% strongly agreed that they valued the Executive Coaching Group overall.
- 93% said they had applied what they learned to perform better in their position/role.
- 90% reported sharing what they had learned in Executive Coaching group with their managers and direct reports.

This last finding is especially significant, as it shows an important outcome of the experience that might otherwise be hidden: it grows a learning culture throughout the organization.

From the Members

What quantitative data tends to hide is the personal and emotional impact of a program on its participants. For that, we need to look to words from the members themselves.

One member who had survived a particularly grueling quarter credited the customized coaching element of the program at helping her through it. "I am getting to a place where I can more effectively deal with the challenges," she said. "Without the opportunity to process the experience and think through it in my coaching sessions, I'm not sure I would have made it through this."

Another member was able to look at the changes in her team and recognized that they were due to her learning in Executive Coaching Group. "I have used the skills I learned about Listening, Coaching,

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and Leading so others will follow, and now I see it's made a difference. Turnover is decreasing. My employees are happier! They feel comfortable with me and we understand each other's expectations. We have the foundation now to be a stronger team."

These remarks from the Executive Coaching Group members highlight the supportive nature of the program. This kind of personal leadership development doesn't just develop their skills – it actually serves to protect and preserve top talent and promotes their longevity in an organization.

Lessons Learned: Success for the Future

I mentioned earlier in this article that the Executive Coaching Group at LHN grew partly by design and partly through evolution. In other words, even though much of the structural methodology of the program was in place from beginning to end, other parts of the model took shape organically over the life of the group. For leaders considering an Executive Coaching Group of their own, a couple of lessons learned from this group's experience could be helpful in ensuring success.

The Importance of Outcomes

The multi-tiered impact of the Executive Coaching Group is perhaps its greatest strength. Like all strengths, it can also be a limitation. It's a complex task to influence on many layers at once – individual, group and team goals are all important but together can cause either confusion or overwhelm or both.

To be truly effective, a high-functioning team should have clear, agreed-upon goals. In a work team, these goals may be for deliverables related to the business. In an Executive Coaching Group, the goals may be related to learning and development. Either way, they should be determined up front and maintained with a sense of consistency over time.

Otherwise, even a cohesive team can get off track. Like a flock of birds swooping through the air, they can dart quickly from one direction to another. That change in direction can be exciting. It can be exactly what a group needs to stay current, especially in a fast-paced and changing environment, but if the process isn't tethered to its goals, the group can also find itself inadvertently diving in a direction off-course – only to find out later they'd missed their mark.

At LHN, the outcomes were more clearly defined after 18 months together than they had ever been. At that stage of the game, they became a powerful tool for the group to carry forward into their year ahead. The fact that they had established individual, group and team goals enabled them to embrace new opportunities for learning, without losing their sense of direction.

Even though goals and outcomes will change for a team from year to year, it is only through clarity and transparency that a team is able to stay focused on what they are trying to achieve.

The Drive Toward Independence

Another effect of the evolving nature of the Executive Coaching Group was the drive toward independence.

When LHN's Executive Coaching Group began, the focus was on individual learning and development, primarily based on 360-degree feedback of each and every member, with their own

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personal action plans and one-on-one coaching. The focus on the group became apparent over time, and the motivation to become a true team showed up later still.

New Executive Coaching Groups starting from scratch may want to choose a phased approach to layering on new goals – proactively structuring the evolution that unfolded naturally for LHN. On the other hand, a complete Executive Coaching Group model can be designed from the beginning with the goal of independence in mind.

The name (“Executive Coaching Group”) is a good reminder of what this kind of learning experience can and should be. Like all good executive coaching, it is a process, rooted in the individual leader but aligned to the business. Like all good executive coaching, it balances the continuity provided by a strong structure with the flexibility to respond to changes in the company over time. And like all good executive coaching, it comes to an end – when the work is done, yes, but more importantly when the participants learn to coach themselves.

Barnard noted the change in the team as he looked back at the experience, saying, “The Executive Coaching Group has been instrumental in the ongoing success of my leadership team, all of whom benefitted from the coaching and guidance.”

“After:” The Makings of a Team

When the Executive Coaching Group met for its last live event, the progress they had made was palpable. The goal of the meeting was to reset their expectations for the year ahead – for the continuation of the Executive Coaching Group in its next evolution, but more importantly, for themselves.

Around the room, we had posted charts, which they filled up with thoughts and ideas about what makes an Executive Coaching Group successful. They moved in small groups, laughing, sharing experiences, and building on each other’s ideas.

On one wall, they filled poster after poster with their intended outcomes for themselves as individuals and as a team. Discussion was lively as they voted and made decisions.

Toward the end of the meeting, they designed their future. Fresh ideas emerged, people stood and contributed, and Barnard himself joined in for an animated discussion about how the team could own their own learning and development by forming task forces to move forward on the Executive Group Coaching model.

In this one final three-hour session, it became apparent the team had finally emerged. More importantly, they could do this on their own – which after all may be the hallmark of a true, high-functioning team.

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