

Leadership Team Coaching; a trust-based coaching relationship

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Abstract

The coaching relationship is seen as integral to individual coaching, but less is known about the nature of the relationship within a team coaching context. This study explores the importance that leadership team coaching practitioners attach to the coaching relationship and as a consequence what that means for how they work with teams. A qualitative single case study method was utilised and data gathered using semi-structured interviews, including critical incident technique. The overall finding from the research was that coaches considered it important to develop a trust-based relational connection with teams at both an individual and a collective level but that establishing and maintaining that connection was, at times, both complex and challenging.

Key Words: team coaching, team performance, coaching relationship, trust

Introduction

In the last ten years the coaching profession has seen a significant increase in the number of organisations utilising individual coaching, particularly executive coaching, to enhance individual and ultimately organisational performance (Brown & Grant, 2010). Research (Griffiths, 2013) now suggests that forward-thinking organisations are looking at team coaching, which is the coaching of a team towards the achievement of collective goals (Thornton, 2010), as a vehicle for delivering additional value through the creation of high-performing teams. The rationale for the focus on team performance is linked to frustration with the concept of the leader as hero who will single-handedly deliver organisational objectives (Hawkins, 2014), together with the growth of organisational complexity necessitating the need for leaders to build effective teams if they are to 'thrive or even survive' (Kets de Vries, 2011, p.xvii). Leadership team coaching in particular, which focuses on the senior management teams within an organisation (Hawkins, 2014), is seen as a potential solution to the 'organisational silo formation and thinking' constraining many businesses (Kets de Vries, 2011, p.xvii). It is also seen as a means to bridge the gap between 'individual and organisational learning' (Clutterbuck, 2013, p.19).

The coaching profession is responding to this trend, with the emergence of articles and accredited training programmes focusing on team coaching (Carr & Peters, 2013; Clutterbuck, 2013), but much less is known about how team coaching can be utilised to enhance organisational performance in practice (Clutterbuck, 2007). In addition, there is a general lack of clarity within the coaching literature (Brown & Grant, 2010) as to what constitutes team coaching and how it differs from group coaching or other team-development interventions (Clutterbuck, 2013; Hawkins, 2014). Thus, it would seem that the potential of team coaching is recognised but that there is a lack of clarity as to how to realise that potential in practice (Griffiths, 2013).

As a coaching practitioner who worked with leadership teams, I was keen to understand more about team coaching and how it could be effectively deployed, in an informed way, to make

better use of what it had to offer. There is a limited amount of research into team coaching (Clutterbuck, 2013; Brown & Grant, 2010) and the research that does exist tends to focus largely on the structural aspects of teams and the team coaching process (Thornton, 2010; Clutterbuck, 2007; Hawkins, 2014; Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Scant attention is given to the coaching relationship, despite its prominence as a coaching enabler within research on individual coaching (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007; Blackman & Cook, 2006; Thomson, 2009; Bluckert, 2005). This suggested a potential research gap and a need to understand more about team coaching and the role of the coaching relationship.

In exploring the literature that did exist on the coaching relationship, one critical relational component that emerged, particularly in individual coaching, was the need for both parties to the relationship to feel able to establish and maintain a level of trust (Thomson, 2009). Many writers (Bluckert, 2005; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007; Wasylshyn, 2003) talked about trust being a key characteristic of the coaching relationship (Bluckert, 2005), particularly because it enabled a coaching client to feel safe (Edmondson, 1999) to explore what needed to be explored. In fact the International Coaching Federation cite the ability to create a trusting environment as one of the four most important coaching skills (Baron & Morin, 2009). The team coaching literature had less focus on relational components per se including trust but reference was made to the need for team coaches to build a safe and trusting environment in which team members are able to share views and information and bring to the surface issues or potential areas of conflict (Carr & Peters, 2013; Thornton, 2010).

In researching the team coaching relationship I identified five relational themes. Theme one, which emerged as the most dominant and which is the subject of this paper, centred on the need for coaches to build trust at both an individual and a team level as well as the need to maintain that trust whilst balancing individual and collective needs. Theme two related to coaches' ability to instil confidence in the team as well as being confident to challenge whilst maintaining the integrity of the relationship. Theme three concerned tensions in the relationship, arising either through coach self-doubt or as a consequence of negative emotions being directed towards the coach. Theme four related to complexity created by the relationship dynamic between the coach and the designated team leader. Theme five was concerned with the evolving nature of the relationship over time, often necessitating a different way of working on the part of the coach.

The next section details the research methodology adopted for the study, followed by a presentation of the main findings and a more detailed exploration of theme one; the role of trust as a cornerstone for building the relationship. Concluding with possible implications for team coaches, limitations of the study and suggestions for additional research.

Methodology

I approached the research from an interpretivist perspective, which necessitates the use of a research strategy and methods, which are flexible and capable of capturing multiple realities as well as being descriptive and context-sensitive (Yilmaz, 2013). It also puts the onus on the researcher to understand and interpret the phenomena under review rather than to generalise or identify a cause and effect relationship (Carson *et al.*, 2001). Case study was selected as the research method because it is a flexible methodology, which can accommodate a variety of research designs, data analysis methods and epistemologies (Corcoran *et al.*, 2004; Simons, 2009), including interpretivism. It also allows for the analysis of single phenomena in the background of its context such that the context can help shed light on the phenomena (Kyburz & Graber, 2004).

Selection of Research Participants

In selecting participants, the focus was on identifying coaches who were currently working or had worked with leadership teams. The reason for choosing leadership teams being that they are the most likely recipients of team coaching (Griffiths, 2013; Clutterbuck, 2013) whilst the rationale for choosing coaching practitioners was to collect first-hand knowledge of their perceptions of the importance of the coaching relationship when coaching teams. An additional selection criterion which emerged during the course of the research was the need to distinguish between practitioners who delivered individual coaching but in a group setting (group coaching) from those that delivered team coaching (Clutterbuck, 2013; Hawkins, 2014; Thornton, 2010).

Six coaches took part in the research, two male and four female. In terms of background and experience, all but one of the coaches worked as freelance coaches and consultants. They all had a human resources, organisational development and/or leadership development background and all but one was based in the UK. In terms of coaching experience, all of the coaches had experience of individual and team coaching and had been coaching either formally or informally for between five and fifteen years.

Data Collection Method

Case study research is not limited to any specific data collection methods, but direct observation and interviewing are some of the most common methods used (Yin, 2003). Interviewing was chosen because it was a pragmatic means of gaining access to coaches who were often short on time and it had none of the confidentiality issues associated with observing coaches in action.

Given the exploratory nature of the research and the guidance given by Yin (2003, p.89), that interviews in case study research should be 'guided conversations rather than structured queries', a semi-structured approach was used. This approach had the dual benefit of allowing for a consistency of questioning around themes and the flexibility to probe and ask additional questions depending on coaches' responses. The questions asked of all participants included a small number of critical incident technique (Byrne, 2001) questions, based on those originally developed by De Haan (2008) and included to facilitate the process of drawing out from participants, data about their experiences and perceptions relevant to the coaching relationship. All interviews were conducted via Skype, with the exception of one, which was delivered face-to-face and transcribed verbatim utilising transcription software.

Data Analysis Model

Analysis of interview transcripts was carried out using a thematic approach, which was used because it is a flexible technique, which is not tied to a specific research philosophy or theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and can therefore be used with most qualitative research methods (Boyatzis, 1998), including case study.

Transcripts were read and re-read several times in order to identify themes relevant to the original research question (Aronson, 1995). Five key themes pertaining to the coaching relationship were then identified (see Figure 1 below) and revisited in order to identify possible sub-themes and ensure consistency in terms of the original data.

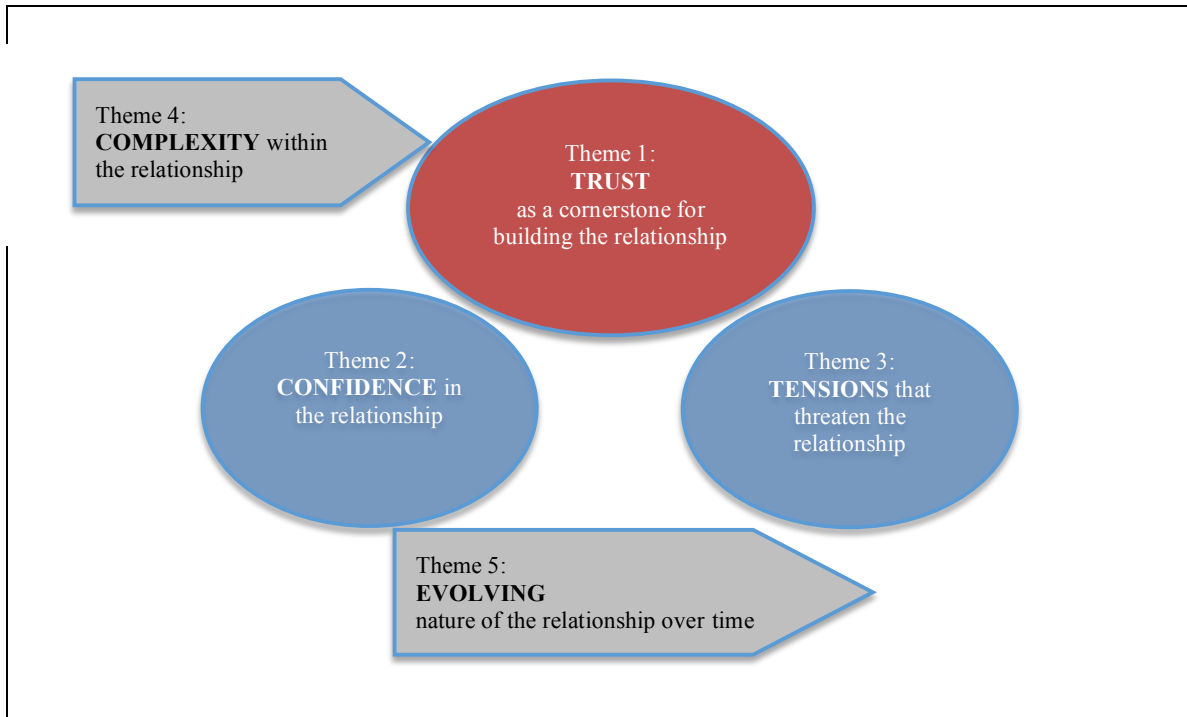


Figure 1: Relationship Themes

Findings

The relationship wasn't the only factor participants cited as being important in team coaching; other emergent themes included the team's clarity of focus, their openness to change and their willingness to hold each other accountable. However, as the main focus of the research was the coaching relationship, the other themes were not explored in any detail as part of the findings. The overall finding from participant coaches was that the quality of the coaching relationship and the way coaches worked to build and enhance that relationship was, in their view, an important factor in enabling them to effectively support teams.

Coaches spoke about striving to build a positive connection with, ideally, all of the members of a team, whilst recognising that the strength of that connection was not necessarily the same with each individual member. Arguably this could be likened to individual coaching, in which the intensity of the coach–client connection varies across coaching clients (Thomson 2013). They also felt that progress with a team could be made without the need for them to have a relationship connection of equal intensity with all team members, as long as they had established a connection with the team as a collective and that that connection was recognised and accepted by the team.

Five main themes relevant to the coaching relationship emerged from the research (see Figure 1 above). Of the five themes, **trust**, as a cornerstone for building the relationship, emerged as the most significant and is the only one of the five themes featured in this paper. All of the participant coaches spoke about the need to build trust at both an individual and a collective level, such that team members trusted them to create a safe and supportive space in which they could disclose, discuss and debate issues relevant to the effectiveness of the team. This concept of individual and collective trust consisted of three sub-themes, which are explored below:

Sub theme 1: Working to build trust with individual members of the team

Part of engendering trust was coaches getting to know something about individual team members, their needs and motivations and what they wanted from the coach and the coaching relationship, much as you would in individual coaching (Peltier, 2010; Flaherty, 2010; Thomson, 2009; Rogers, 2012). As one coach pointed out:

'I often talk to them about what is important to them, what they value the most, where they are in terms of their careers and the team' (Participant 2).

It provides coaches with information about an individual's level of engagement with the impending coaching and whether they are likely to support or derail the coach and the coaching process. It also affords them the opportunity to help individuals understand what they personally can hope to gain from the coaching relationship as a way of increasing their engagement:

'You need to help them understand that they are going to get some personal benefit as well as some shared benefit' (Participant 3).

Understanding more about the individuals who make up a team provides coaches with potentially valuable insights into the nature of relationships within the team, which is important for understanding potential areas of tension or conflict which could make working with the team problematic and prevent it from making progress:

'I understand all the perspectives in the room, I don't expect from the beginning to be on the same page, but at least I know how many pages are in the room' (Participant 5).

All of the coaches talked about carrying out activities that facilitated some form of reciprocal information sharing with members of the team, usually in the form of a one-on-one meeting or telephone call. This was seen as particularly important in the formative stages of the team coaching and/or if coaches didn't have an existing business or coaching relationship from which to build. In fact, many coaches saw this meeting as so crucial to the relationship building process that they said they would refuse to coach a team if it was not possible to build in time for one-on-one discussions with individual members:

'I normally spent individual time with each member and I won't enter into team coaching unless we (me and the client) build that in' (Participant 2).

Support for some form of individual-based interaction prior to working with teams can be found in the team coaching literature (Thornton, 2010; Clutterbuck, 2007; Hawkins, 2014). Thornton (2010) suggests that this information exchange has a dual purpose; it is about preparing the coach, in terms of an insight into the dynamics operating within the team, and it is about preparing the team member for engaging with the coach and the coaching process.

At the start of the relationship, coaches want to be seen as trusted non-judgemental partners who will help and support individuals during the team coaching process. Essentially, it is about coaches creating a psychologically safe environment (Edmondson, 1999), in which individuals are able to open up about concerns they might have about their own capability and/or those of team members in terms of team performance and the delivery of team coaching goals. Providing support in the early stages of the relationship makes individuals more accepting of challenges from coaches later in the relationship and, potentially, more open to change. As one coach pointed out:

'It might be challenging downstream; at the beginning it's about helping, it's about enabling and supporting' (Participant 3).

Many coaches coached team members individually and collectively and felt that this significantly contributed to the building of a trust-based relationship and ultimately enabled them to better support teams:

'For me, team coaching would almost always involve some one-to-one work as well. It makes the difference I think in that I can build a closer connection with the individuals as well as the team and probably get under the skin of things even more' (Participant 4).

Hawkins (2014) advises caution when combining team and individual coaching, because of the danger of coaches over-focusing and over-prioritising individual over collective team agendas, particularly as one might be at odds with the other. He suggests, instead, that coaches consider individually coaching the team leader to become the team coach and to eventually take over the coach's role. This approach was referenced by some but not all of the participant coaches.

It would appear that engendering trust in the coach and coaching process is the starting point for the relationship and an important building block for coaches if they are to work productively with teams. That is not to say that the coach can't make progress with the team if he/she doesn't establish a trusting connection with each member of the team, but it may be more challenging for the coach and progress may be slower.

Sub theme 2: Working to build trust with the team as a collective

In addition to establishing individual trust-based relationships, participants talked about the importance of building a collective alliance that all members of a team buy into (Hawkins, 2014). Suggesting the need to build a team relationship, which was independent of, and different to, the relationship that coaches might build with team members as individuals (Thornton, 2010).

Research on group dynamics tell us that teams have their own behavioural norms (Thornton, 2010; Schuman, 2005), which coaches need to take into account if they are to build a trusting relationship with the collective. These behavioural norms are different for different teams (Kets de Vries, 2005; Dunlop, 2006; Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002) and coaches can quickly lose the trust and cooperation of teams if they fail to notice them or misread them. As one coach pointed out:

'The dynamics of the team shifted and I was unable to do anything about that so by the time we went through certain stages of the day they were disengaging with the process' (Participant 2).

One participant talked about the importance of coaches gaining the trust and engagement of the collective at the start of the team coaching process, which he personally did by demonstrating that he cared about the experience he was creating for them and that their interests were paramount to him:

'The most challenging is figuring out the best way to begin work with the team. I make what they are going through an enjoyable experience in some way and because of that there is a pre-disposition for them to build the relationship with me' (Participant 2).

Research on team development suggests that teams change over time and that the group identity of a particular team is likely to be less well developed when the team is newly formed

than when it is well established (Tuckman, 1965). This has implications for team coaches in terms of how they engage and build trust with teams. In newly formed teams, individual members are often less trusting of each other and therefore less likely to be open with each other and with the coach (Edmondson, 1999). This was experienced by one of the participant coaches who talked about role modelling trust and openness with teams so that they knew what a trust-based relationship looked like with her and with their team members, whilst another talked about role modelling trust and openness by being prepared to personally disclose to the team:

'I disclose quite a lot. That level of disclosure builds trust. A lot of it does revolve around disclosure at that formative stage' (Participant 2).

All coaches talked about needing to get teams to trust them to create a supportive environment in which it was safe to disclose information about themselves to team colleagues, as a basis for greater individual understanding and enhanced cooperation. This was important no matter how long the team had been together but was particularly important for newly established teams:

'When it comes down to it you want them all to feel able to self-disclose stuff about themselves and to do that with a level of safety and protection from the coach' (Participant 3).

The creation of this trusting environment was about enabling individuals to open up about their needs and what they needed from other members of the team as well as from the coach:

'You need to focus on the relationships that exist within the team, drawing people out in terms of how they best work together to achieve the things that they want to' (Participant 2).

Coaches also talked about how securing team trust gave them the permission they needed to challenge teams on ineffective ways of working or interacting with each other, which they observed and considered to be negatively impacting the team:

'The coach is there to challenge, question, and hold the team accountable. If the coach is doing their job, they create some positive discomfort with the team by making them think outside the box, go beyond their comfort zone' (Participant 6).

It also enabled team members to engage in the process of feedback and constructive challenge (Clutterbuck, 2013), without fear that 'the team would embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up' (Edmondson, p.354). As one coach pointed out when talking about what, for her, was important in team coaching:

'Enabling people to have the courage to have the conversations that matter and keep doing that, whether it is with their team, whether it is with each other, whether it is with the boss. That's the thing that keeps it on track' (Participant 5).

This focus on the need for the team coach to create a trusting and supportive environment for the team is consistent with the findings of Carr & Peters (2013) whom in their case study research on team coaching reference the value team members they interviewed derived from the coach creating a safe environment in which to disclose and debate team issues. Similarly, practitioner literature on team effectiveness cites the establishment of trust amongst team members as an important characteristic for high-performing teams (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; LaFasto & Larson, 2001; Mitsch, 2015) and vital for effective teamwork (Lencioni, 2002).

Sub Theme 3: Working to retain trust with individuals and the collective

Once they had begun to build trust, coaches spoke about the challenge of remaining supportive of the needs of particular individuals whilst continuing to act in the interests of the collective, particularly when divergent views were at play. This often involved challenging specific individuals in the interests of the collective or conversely, challenging the collective in the interests of the individual, hoping that the challenge would be accepted and perceived as a positive intervention by both individual and team. This seems to suggest that if a team is to work effectively together as a collective, coaches need to ensure that the psychological safety of the team and the individuals that make up that team remain intact, particularly when the team dynamics become challenging or strained.

Edmondson (1999, p.355) in her work on teams suggests that ‘team psychological safety is a group level construct’, that all members need to perceive to be characteristic of the team. She also suggests that it is not the same as group cohesiveness, too much of which can result in members being unwilling to productively challenge and disagree with individual or collective views. Being the guardians of ‘psychological safety’ requires coaches to remain vigilant to the feelings they are picking up from the team as a collective, or from specific team members, and then deciding whether or not it is in the best interests of the team and his/her relationship with the team to share those observations (Hawkins, 2014). This has some parallels with the judgements coaches have to make in individual coaching (Thomson, 2013; Peltier, 2010; Bluckert, 2005; Machin, 2010) and was referenced by many of the participant coaches. They talked about trusting their instincts to guide them in terms of the choice and timing of individual and collective team interventions:

‘There is something about a rhythm that you can feel in a room. I trust my feeling, my core, to tell me’ (Participant 3).

In individual coaching, the coach retains the trust of his/her client by offering up observations and challenging them in ways, which are perceived to be open, transparent and non-judgemental (Peltier, 2010; O’Broin & Palmer, 2010a&b). Similar observations, were made by team coaches:

‘I am overt in telling them what is going on, overt in terms of disclosing what I see’ (Participant 2).

One coach talked about sharing the impact that collective team behaviour was having on her personally, in the hope that it would be perceived to be less threatening feedback and would be acted upon as a consequence:

‘Part of the role of the coach is to hold the mirror up to say: this is what I’m seeing... the impact it’s having on me is...’ (Participant 4).

Another coach referenced the importance of connecting with a team but not connecting so closely that you can’t remain impartial and stay outside of the team dynamic (Hawkins, 2014), thus continuing to be seen by the team as a neutral observer whose interventions can be trusted because they come with no personal agenda. By remaining outside of the dynamic, coaches can also ensure that teams take accountability for issues that arise, rather than ignoring them or avoiding them by making them the responsibility of the coach that has enabled the issue to emerge. As one coach pointed out:

‘You have to make sure that you don’t end up carrying the ball for the problem that is created by them’ (Participant 3).

All of the coaches talked about the importance of contracting with teams both at the outset and throughout the duration of the relationship, just as you would in individual coaching (Cox *et al.*, 2010; Sherman & Freas, 2004), a breach of that alliance by coaches being seen as something that would fundamentally damage trust and the integrity of the relationship.

Support for the requirement that the coach balance individual and collective needs in order to build productive relationships and make progress with teams can be found in the team coaching literature. Hawkins (2014, p.227) talks about team coaches needing to connect ‘with all team members’ without giving preference to any particular ‘individual or sub-group’. This research suggests that team coaches do indeed face this challenge, and they seem to approach the dichotomy by utilising many of the trust-building actions that are used by coaches working one-to-one (Peltier, 2010; Bluckert, 2005; Thomson, 2009). They contract with the team at the outset and at regular points during the relationship; they remain present and open to what is happening in the moment whilst working with teams, using their intuition and experience to judge what and when to share and with whom, and they seek to remain honest and transparent in their interactions (Cox *et al.*, 2010; Peltier, 2010), both with individual team members and with the collective.

Conclusion

The findings of this small study suggest, that whilst it cannot be seen as the sole enabler, the building of a trust based relationship at both an individual and a collective level would appear to be of some significance for coaches working with teams. All coaches engaged in trust building activities which would create and deepen the relational connection and many attempted to combine individual and team coaching, if it could be contracted for, as a means of deepening that connection. However, trust at an individual level didn’t guarantee trust at a team level for the personality of the “team” was not the same as the collective personalities of the individuals who made up that team. In addition, even when an effective relational connection had been established, coaches continued to need to work at building and maintaining trust, to better enable them to challenge the team and make progress. They also worked at maintaining a psychological safe environment for all parties, particularly when the relational connection became strained due to the emergence of intra-team or coach/team tension.

The aim of this study was to understand more about team coaching and in particular the importance placed on the relationship by practitioners engaged in leadership team coaching. Based on the findings, I would suggest that, as with individual coaching (Bluckert, 2005; Thomson, 2009), the coaching relationship is an integral aspect of team coaching; by enabling an effective relational connection, coaches can engage teams in the process of coaching and can facilitate the trust-building process necessary for effective team working (Lencioni, 2002; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). The establishment of an effective trust-based relationship also has the potential to facilitate change by enabling coaches to challenge team behaviours and current ways of thinking and working, as well as providing a supportive environment in which teams can explore new ideas and innovate (Clutterbuck, 2007; Thornton, 2010; Carr & Peters, 2013; Hawkins, 2014).

In drawing attention to the experiences of team coaches I hope I have provided some insights into what coaches seeking to work with teams might expect to encounter, what skills and competencies they might need and what challenges they might need to overcome, when working with the complex relational dynamic which is team coaching.

Limitations and future research

The key limiting aspect of this research is that it is based on the perceptions of team coaches only and takes no account of the views of the teams they coach. Had it been possible to access team members they may have presented very different perspectives or possibly endorsed the views of coaches. Nevertheless, it does provide some insights into how a small group of team coaches experience and work with the dynamics of the coaching relationship.

Team coaching as a practice is largely dominated by practitioner literature, and there is limited research-based data available, particularly in relation to the coach–team relationship. The profession would benefit from additional research on the coach–team relationship, possibly through a review of the relationship throughout the duration of a specific team coaching engagement taken from the perspective of teams and coaches.

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