

Group coaching in a large complex organisation: Lessons learnt from experience

Sean A O'Connor, Ingrid Studholme and Anthony M Grant
Coaching Psychology Unit, School of Psychology, University of Sydney, Sydney
NSW 2006, Australia

Contact Email: anthony.grant@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

This article presents qualitative findings from a pilot group coaching program that was conducted within a large Australian public healthcare organisation. Using Nueman's (2000) three phase coding system and Spector's (1984) methodology, transcripts were analyzed for key themes (from both coachees' and coaches' perspectives) in response to probe questions. These themes included the need for a clear and explicit goal focus; the importance of solid upfront preparation and communication; the vital role of a group coaching process structure; the value of explicit program sponsorship and follow up; and the need to ensure the right people who are genuinely engaged participants.

Keywords: Coaching, group coaching, healthcare coaching

Introduction

Coaching has become a mainstream methodology for enhancing performance, people development and facilitating cultural change in a wide range of organisations (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016). To date most applications of coaching in the workplace involve individual or one-to-one coaching relationships where a professional coach, peer or line manager provides coaching services to help individual coachees reach organisational-related goals and outcomes (Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2013). There has been significant interest in extending this individualistic coaching approach to teams and groups, and *prima facie* this seems like a good idea.

However, there are a number of issues that the aspiring evidence-based practitioner should consider. Firstly, most of the literature in this area has been conceptual or opinion articles, anecdotal reports or practitioner handbooks (e.g., Thornton, 2016). There are few empirical studies of group coaching (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2017). Where empirical reports are found they have typically discussed group coaching "successes", rather than what has not been so effective. This is not unique to coaching, indeed the "file drawer" problem, where studies with statistically insignificant results, or "unsuccessful" outcomes are not published in journals and gather dust in the drawer, has been acknowledged for many years (Rosenthal, 1979). Yet we can learn much from what has not been effective; at the very least such studies can give us better real-life guidelines for future work.

Secondly, group coaching is, by its very nature, more complex than individual coaching. Groups can be far more than the sum of their parts. Groups within organisations exemplify many of the spoken and unspoken tensions that permeate the organisational system and reflect the organisations' levels of stability and cohesiveness, or turbulence or chaos at any point in time. This is particularly of issue when an organisation is going through a period of substantive change or organisational turbulence (Grant & O'Connor, 2015). It is in such situations that group coaching holds much promise. The idea here is that, coaching small groups in the pursuit of a common goal may help steady the broader system by creating stabilizing nodes that can act as positive attractor anchor points. In this way, it is hoped to maximize the "coaching ripple effect" and reenergize and redirect the system as a whole (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2013).

This all sounds good in theory, and there are a number of books and articles that clearly and usefully articulate such propositions (Brown & Grant, 2010; Hawkins, 2014). However, this is not easy to do in practice. Indeed, designing and implementing large scale group coaching programs in large complex organisations is extremely challenging, and this is made more so when dealing with multiple stakeholders who have competing interests and agendas (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012).

The research question under investigation here focuses on understanding how to better conduct group coaching interventions in organisations, thus the aim of this article is to provide insights into the experience and reflections of participants in a group coaching program that was conducted within the Australian healthcare system – a large complex organisation that operates under considerable stress and pressure – and to use these real-life insights to help give further guidance in designing guidelines for group coaching programs.

This article briefly reviews the literature on group coaching to identify important components of group coaching, and then presents qualitative findings from a group coaching program in a large complex organisation. The qualitative data is used to identify key themes from the group coaching experience and to make recommendations for future group coaching and intervention designs.

Overview of the group coaching literature

While there is a lack of empirical evidence on the efficacy of group coaching approaches, there is a body of theoretical literature seeking to define group coaching. Definitions applied to group coaching range broadly from a form of leadership supporting team coordination and task achievement (Hackman & Wageman, 2005) to independent individuals participating in a group process together (Rauen, 2005). In many ways the current state of the group coaching literature resembles the state of the individual coaching literature of the early 2000's, in that there are more conceptual or opinion-based publications than rigorous empirical studies.

The lack of conceptual clarity is echoed in the way group coaching has been implemented and reported in the literature. There exists a broad range of coaching methodologies that have been utilized in group coaching situations. Many approaches resemble the iterative nature of established individual coaching approaches, utilizing multiple sessions of differing lengths over extended periods of time (Muhlberger & Traut-Mattausch, 2015; Stelter, Nielsen, & Wikman, 2011; Torbrand & Ellam-Dyson, 2015; Whitley, 2013). Others employ a mixture of methodologies that may include group facilitation, training, peer-to-peer coaching and 360 degree feedback (Barr & van Nieuwerburgh, 2015; Coates, 2013; Florent-Treacy, 2009; Fusco, O'Riordan, & Palmer, 2015; Grajfoner, 2009; Vesso, 2015) while still referring to the process as group coaching.

Methodological and definitional issues aside, different forms of group coaching have been identified as effective in a variety of ways. Group coaching has been identified as a supportive process for those adapting to living with long term illness (Whitley, 2013). In a randomized controlled trial, Stelter and colleagues (2011) concluded that narrative collaborative group coaching had a positive impact on social recovery and wellbeing for elite student athletes. Torbrand and Ellam-Dyson (2015) applied a cognitive behavioural group coaching approach, identifying improvements in student procrastination compared to a control, while others have found group coaching to be effective in procrastination alongside individual level goal attainment (Muhlberger & Traut-Mattausch, 2015). Group coaching has also been found to improve wellbeing, goal achievement and reduce mental health issues for individuals managing change through gender transition (Grajfoner, 2009). Coates (2013) found that participation in group coaching within a leadership development program increased learning transfer, and Vesso (2015) reported that group coaching increased teams' perception of leader trustworthiness and task orientation.

While these findings are encouraging in that they identify the potential for the application of group coaching-like approaches, more attention needs to be paid to the effective components of these processes if we are to begin translating research to effective practice, and one way to do that is to explore the experience and reflections of those who participate in group coaching interventions. This paper aims to contribute in this respect.

A number of researchers have gathered qualitative data on the experience of group coaching processes, with the aim of identifying important considerations when conducting group coaching interventions. Through qualitative interviews conducted with experienced group coaches, Hauser (2014) suggests considerations which include; clear goals and outcomes; differentiating between directive task-focused and process-oriented approaches; and the timing of interventions, as well personal attributes, background and experiences of the coach. While Hauser's (2014) conclusions help to identify potential areas for supporting group coaching utility, the inferences drawn are entirely from the perspective of highly experienced group coaches – rather than the coachees themselves.

In other related research Godfrey and colleagues (2013) explored aspects of a group coaching program for two large national health care improvement teams. Through a qualitative analysis of feedback from the coachees and the coaches involved, categories that were perceived as being supportive of the group coaching engagement emerged. These included preparation for engaging in the group coaching in conjunction with a supportive organisation context, constructive collaborative relationships, and appropriate helping and technical support.

Carr and Peters (2013) provide a case study analysis of two leadership teams identifying common effective coaching components from their group coaching experience. Important group processes that were identified included; the team's character and working agreement; level of participation; the coach's manner and actions; the logistics of setting up and launching the coaching intervention; as well as the coaching structure and follow-up process. Potential improvements identified included the level of collaboration and productivity, the importance to focus more on relationships, engaging personal learning, communication and participation, and ensuring impact is extended beyond the team coach supporting utility of purpose. Carr and Peters (2013) then present key factors that are important in increasing the chances of a successful outcome. These include; having the time and forum for discussions; developing clear shared and focused goals; emphasizing safety and sharing; valuing diversity of perspective across

member represented disciplines; supporting collaborative decision making; improved communication and relationships; and commitment and stability of membership.

As can be seen in this brief review there are a broad range of suggestions made around important components of effective group coaching engagements. A broad mapping of the issues emerging from this review include the importance of participants being prepared to engage in the group coaching process; ensuring the goals set are engaging and appropriate; issues related to relationships and interactions between coach and group members, as well as process-related specifics such as differentiating between directive task-focused and process-oriented approaches; and the impact of the coaching in the workplace. However, it is clear that more research is needed in order to further develop our understanding of group coaching intervention processes. This was the aim of the present study.

Organisational Context of the present Study

This study was conducted within a section of the Australian public health system. In common with most healthcare systems worldwide, the Australian public health services are expected to deliver optimal performance whilst operating in a context of increasing budget pressure and escalating demand for services (AMA, 2016). This particular section of the Australian healthcare system operates more than 230 public hospitals, as well as providing community health and other public health services through a network of local health districts, specialty networks and non-government affiliated health organisations. The agency covers a geographical region of approximately 800,000 square kilometres with over 100,000 employees. The 2016 budget is in the region of AU\$22 billion.

The aim of the coaching program was to deliver improved system performance and develop the leadership and management capability of executives, senior managers and healthcare professionals in the public health system.

Method

The coaching in the program was clearly distinguished from counselling, training and consulting, and was aimed at helping the people being coached (the “coachees”) set and attain work-relevant goals, gain insights about themselves, their teams, their environment and others, and deliver results in terms of learning, development and goal attainment. Coaching services were provided by a panel of professional executive and leadership coaches external to the organisation.

The group coaching sessions targeted a group or cohort of leaders at a similar leadership level within the organisation. The group goals focused on particular work based priorities or state-wide priority areas, such as patient flow, integrated care and ease of access, collaboration, improving communications and connections across the system and where appropriate between group participants in their functional roles. Participants were selected based on their development potential and their key leadership roles in implementing such projects and participation was voluntarily.

The four coaches were all professionally-trained, each with over five years professional coaching experience, and held a range of coaching qualifications including PhDs, Masters Degrees in Coaching Psychology and Master Coach Certifications from the International Coach Federation.

The group coaching sessions

The group coaching sessions were grounded in a solution-focused, cognitive-behavioural framework (Grant, 2003). From this perspective coaching focuses on facilitating goal attainment by helping the coachees in the group understand the reciprocal relationships between one's thoughts, feelings, behaviour and the environment, and purposefully structuring or changing these to better facilitate goal attainment. The group coaching sessions were conducted as a facilitated goal-focused discussion, with emphasis being placed on enhancing participants' systemic perspectives as much as individual and group goal attainment. Each session began with a review of progress to date, identification of specific individual and group goals for that session, exploration of the key issues and options, and agreement of specific actions steps to be completed before the next session (see Ives & Cox, 2012). The group coaching program consisted of three, two-hour group coaching sessions. There were four groups, each with 6 or 7 members. There were 27 participants (11 males and 16 females; average age 27 yrs.).

Procedure

Participants in the group coaching program were contacted by email and invited to participate in an interview process to discuss their experience of the group coaching program. The response rate was 78% (21 of 27 participants). Before the interview appropriate documentation was sent to the participants outlining the probe questions and participants gave their informed consent.

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed and used to gather information about participants' experiences (see Table 1 for interview probe questions). Interview questions were designed to elicit open-ended responses wherever possible. These probe questions reflected the areas of interest in this research and were developed in consultation with primary stakeholders. These areas of interest were; personal preparation for the coaching program; issues related to goals; issues related to group processes; logistics of the engagement and future directions and; the impact on the workplace. Interviews were conducted by telephone and were between 15 and 30 minutes long. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed by a professional transcribing service.

Following Nueman's (2000) three phase coding system, transcripts were analyzed for key themes in response to each probe question and then coded according to those themes. During the first phase one researcher performed an initial scan of the data, highlighted key words or phrases and identified initial emergent themes. Through a process of collaborative analysis members of the research team then identified the core themes whilst linking these to the aims of the study. As recommended by Spector (1984) the validity of the categories was then further established by asking the questions: Do the categories fit and work? Are they clearly indicated by the data? Reliability was established by looking for inconsistencies in the responses and ensuring there was minimal overlap between the various designated categories. In the second phase of the coding, researchers focused on connecting the various identified themes, finding links in the data and looking for emerging patterns. In the final or third phase, researchers reread the data and identified specific quotes and excerpts that concisely illustrated the final themes.

Table 1: Structured Interview Focus Areas and Probe Questions

Area 1: Personal preparation for the coaching program

- What (if anything) did you do to prepare for the program?
 - How could you have better been prepared for the program?
-

Area 2: Issues Related to Goals

- Where you able to identify meaningful goals? What where they?
 - Was coaching useful in helping you with these goals? If so how?
 - Was coaching not useful? If so how?
-

Area 3. Group Process

- What happened in the coaching sessions?
 - Did you feel that the group functioned as a whole? How did it function?
-

Area 4. Logistics and Future Directions

- Did you feel that the program was well organized?
 - What could be done to improve the program in future?
-

Area 5. Impact in the Workplace

- Did the coaching have an impact in the workplace? If so, how?
 - How (if it did) did the coaching help you deal with the challenges of your workplace?
-

Results and Preliminary Discussion

There were over eight hours of interviews and 360 pages of transcribed data which revealed the following themes.

Overall positive experience of the program

Overall, the program was positively received by participants. People really appreciated the opportunity to connect with their colleagues across different areas of the organisation in a way that they normally did not. A broad key theme that emerged here related to enhanced understanding of each other's perspective around shared challenges:

We had quite a broad representation on our group. We had Allied Health, Senior Medical, Nursing, Patient flow, Ambulance, and GP. So we covered off quite a fair range of the Health's sector, who aren't necessarily aligned in their service provision or wouldn't work together. But getting them all (together) ... and getting them to say what they thought, what this was about, how this was going to help, or where their interests lie. I think was that was really good. And everyone got to see each other ... which was really good.

Another commented that:

Yes it definitely was helpful ... without the coaching for a start we wouldn't have come together as a group ... you know it's obviously quite meaningful actually sitting in a room face to face. With people who are an important part of the system, and getting to know them on a personal level rather than just potentially this is a patient I am referring you.

Many expressed hope that the program would continue:

Don't give up. I really do think that the coaching helps you know, to get people to start thinking outside of the box... you know to do so in a safe environment.

Areas for Improvement: Five Key Points from the Coachees' Perspective

There were a number of responses about how the program could be improved. It should be noted that the organisational context (as in most public health services) was a high pressure working environment, with little time to reflect and the implementation of this program was conducted under time and budget restraints. This pressure is illustrated by a number of comments. For example:

It was a really bad time for us. We were really just about to start all our preparation for moving into a new hospital. Everyone had a lot of meetings to attend, and it was very difficult, we just didn't have the time or the energy to focus on the coaching I think.

Operationally I really have to have someone else relieve me otherwise its very difficult for me to focus. The phone rings all the time.

In analyzing the data, the following key categories emerged (note: some participants made more than one response), and these have implications for group coaching programs in general, as well as for this specific program. Table 2 presents the themes that emerged and the number of responses in each category.

Table 2: Key themes and response frequency

General focus of theme	Number of responses
Need for a clear and explicit goal focus	30
Need for solid upfront preparation and communication	20
Need for group coaching process structure	20
Need for explicit program sponsorship and follow up	17
Ensure the right people, genuinely engaged participants	14

1. Need for a clear and explicit goal focus

The coaching program aimed to be coachee-centred and to let the participants themselves determine the specific goals. This philosophical perspective is in line with many mainstream approaches to coaching (e.g., Whitmore, 1996). However, many participants felt that there was a lack of clear goal focus. The problem in this context was that it was very hard for the group to determine a suitable group goal and this led to some feeling of uncertainty:

There was sort of a group cobbled together with sort of a vague idea of what they wanted to achieve, and then given a very valuable resource but then some team members weren't on board to start off with, or already had fixed ideas regardless of what the project achieved. I guess for me if the end results not going to make a difference why waste a valuable resource on it.

Some groups were able to develop goals that were both meaningful and specific and those group members seemed to experience the most traction and collaboration:

But from where I sit, it was definitely of value, and if the opportunity comes up to have executive coaching something like this around a specific subject ... I think this is a very positive step for (staff) to equip them with the tools and resources to do stuff that's a little different to their normal way of doing stuff.

2. Need for solid upfront preparation and communication

The organisation had put considerable effort into the development and management of the program. However, given the complex nature of the organisation and multiple stakeholders involved (including a range of government and health bodies in addition to the organisation itself), it was not always possible to ensure that communications were clear and appropriately targeted. This is not an unusual situation. Such communication issues are common place in large complex organisations (Bunker & Alban, 2012). In this case, most participants wanted more information on why they were involved, including aims, expectations, process structure, sponsorship and support.

There was very little if not any, information about what the project and coaching was all about...we had discussed it as a group, but we didn't really know what we were being asked. We didn't understand the whole project itself. We didn't know what we were there for; we didn't know what it was about.

I did think it was actually a good idea but I did think it could be set up differently. And possibly been more meaningful had it been set up to add a little bit more focus in the set up add to that to give us a little bit more time to prepare for it. I probably would have come in with more buy-in rather than turning up on that first day not knowing what we were doing, where we were going with this and what it was all about.

3. Need for group coaching process structure

As mentioned previously, the program aimed to be coachee-centred (e.g., Whitmore, 1996). Beyond specifying a solution-focused cognitive-behavioural approach, no specific group coaching process was imposed on the coaches or coachees. Unfortunately, this attempt at promoting an egalitarian ethos within the group meant that there were no explicit or standardized structures for each session. Where there was a lack of cohesion in the group, this lack of a standardized structure led some participants to feel lost within the process. Not surprisingly some participants wanted greater clarity on

the group coaching process and structure, and a better understanding of how the coaching fitted with organisation's strategy, operations and other projects:

I might be wrong here but I think Health thrives on structure... I am a very practical person I guess I function and develop better if I have got an understanding of some sort of structure around what we are doing.

If you're going to do it again it would be very important to define exactly what the aim is... And what the outcomes you know, what was expected at the end of the day. So what sort of outcome measures were looking for... and also empowerment, whatever the recommendations you come with will actually mean something...to someone somewhere, and will be taken you know, into account. Where I think we were lacking that in our project so it sort of you know, disenfranchised it if you like, the participants were you know, what's the point.

4. Need for explicit program sponsorship and follow up

It is common for those who work in large complex organisations to feel somewhat disconnected from the decision-making part of the organisation and to feel a sense of confusion about change initiatives (Adler, 2012). Likewise in this context, some participants felt little sense of buy in or support in the workplace for their efforts and lacked ways to share recommendations or review the program:

I think at the end of the coaching sessions we had a bunch of notes. But we didn't have any recommendations, or we sort of did but we didn't have any, direction from our leadership or a forum where we could actually pitch what we had discussed in the coaching. There was nowhere to take this stuff, you know, it was just basically a really interesting exercise. And I feel a bit uncomfortable for that it didn't go anywhere. Because I'm sure that it was well intentioned.

5. Ensure the right people, genuinely engaged participants

As has previously been mentioned, a key feature of many large organisations is difficulty in effectively communicating information about change initiatives. This is hardly surprising, given the number of diverse stakeholders, often with competing personal and political agendas. Such complexity means that it is not easy to select the right participants – participants who are motivated and prepared to work as part of a group towards a common or group goal. In this case, many participants wondered why they were there and their connection with the program:

I think it would have been good if we as a group had a better understanding of what was involved and what we were hoping to achieve from it. We were sort of nominated to participate. Well, we were told to go (chuckle).

You know when you do get a group like that together you need to know that you're all on the same page with the issues and sometimes people with their own agendas take over.

Areas for Improvement: Three Key Points from the Coaches' Perspective

All four of the group coaches were interviewed (100% response rate). The phone interviews were also semi-structured with similar questions, each lasting 30-45 minutes. This data was analysed in the same fashion as the coachees' responses. The top three inter-related issues for coaches were:

1. Program governance and sponsorship
2. Upfront preparation and communication
3. Coaching process and structure

It is of note that the coaches also expressed similar responses to participants around issues such as goal clarity, having the right people and good process.

1. Need for program governance and sponsorship.

This was referred to as the ‘deal-breaker’. All coaches affirmed that strategic process oversight or governance was needed to influence and champion progress, inform program design, manage processes, and make links to other programs and strategy:

It is more of systemic piece and the root of all of this is someone that is clearly owning the whole process, also someone at a local level. For me that was the deal breaker.

2. Need for upfront preparation and communication

All coaches acknowledged that effective upfront communication would have enabled participants to understand aims, expectations and process and help overcome resistance, and this was seen as being particularly important in a large complex organisation, such as health contexts:

As a coach, you want to get the best out of the people and help them find their best selves... As a coach I found it one of the most difficult group coaching set ups that I've worked in. And I've worked in quite a few. And it was really to do with the set up of that group and their expectations coming into it. If that had been done we could have accelerated progress rapidly.

My first meeting with the group everybody looked at each other and said why are we here? I certainly challenged them about, why did they come if they didn't understand why?

3. Need for coaching process and structure

All the coaches agreed that more time was needed to progress goals. The capacity to connect theory to practice and contextualize for health was also important in approaching complex systemic issues:

Three sessions for two hours, but not really. By the time you get settled it's never the whole two hours. We spent the whole of the first session talking this through and getting to a goal. Not wasted time but conscious there was only two more sessions. It was time well spent. Getting the group to work together, listen takes time. I think it really needed another session at the end.

Team and group coaching can add a whole lot of value. But it needs to be thought through because of the complexities of the health organization.

What I could also do was connect theory to practice for them; I could contextualize and give them a lived example that related to health.

Discussion

It is clear that the program was well received by most participants, although there were many areas for improvement identified. It is worth noting that during the period that the group coaching program was being conducted, an individual one-to-one coaching program was also being conducted in the organisation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to report in detail the results of the individual coaching program participation which was associated with significant improvements in goal attainment, solution-focused thinking, leadership self-efficacy, perspective-taking capacity, self-insight and resilience, and ambiguity tolerance. Many of these participants reported being able to use the insights gained in coaching in their personal lives, and reported better work/life balance, less stress and better quality relationships at home (Grant, Studholme, Verma, Kirkwood, & Paton, 2016). Perhaps not surprisingly, given that group coaching is far more process-intensive than individual coaching, the group coaching was perceived as being less effective than the individual coaching.

It is important for the coaching industry to develop specific guidelines and governance frameworks that help build clarity and engagement, so that future groups in similar settings will be able to effectively collaborate on complex challenges and make positive, systemic impact. In the present study the most effective groups were those that had greater goal focus, a robust structure to the coaching sessions and a coach who was experienced in conducting group coaching. These findings echo those of Godfrey, et al (2013) and Hauser (2014) amongst others. In short, as past research and the present study shows, group coaching has considerable potential, but it is yet to be fully realized. It is to this issue that we now turn.

Lessons Learnt

It is clear from the analysis of the qualitative data that group coaching can be a complex process in which high levels of preparation and planning are essential. Much of this must happen prior to the engagement commencing in order for the flexibility of the coaching process to be effective and relevant for all of the individuals, the group as an entity and the organisation involved. While this might seem counter intuitive it reflects the idea of “training tight to play loose”¹. A group coach, much like an individual coach, must create a safe container for members to play with ideas, face challenges, overcome barriers and strive for their goals (Thornton, 2016). Unlike an individual coach, a group coach must do this with the added complexity of interaction dynamics, multiple perspectives and potentially competing interests (Kets de Vries, 2005; Ward, 2008). In order for a group coach to take advantage of the group dynamics in a way that can support the group process and goal attainment at multiple levels, the conditions need to be set clearly to allow for the potential of creative emergence to be realized. Particular care needs to be taken when these processes are conducted within complex organisational contexts (Hawkins, 2014).

Multiple perspectives

Group coaches need to consider carefully the program aims and guidelines upfront in clear consultation with a range of organisational stakeholders. It would seem important to effectively frame the program, build engagement and create shared clarity upfront by providing stakeholders (participants,

¹ The notion of “training tight to play loose” is derived from sport psychology. The idea here is that it is important to ensure that preparation and practice for competition is conducted in very tight and structured fashion because the actual completion itself is a high pressure situation which tends to induce errors. By training tight the number of errors in actual completion can be reduced significantly compared to lackadaisical training (e.g., Williams, 1993).

sponsors, coaches) with clear aims, expectations, frameworks and processes detail. These need to then be communicated clearly to group coaching participants in order for them to understand the expectations of their participation.

It is our suggestion that while the expectations, frameworks and processes need to be specific and agreed, the organisational needs and requirements should be broad enough that each group is able to identify autonomously related group and individual level goals, which they can personally commit to. This should allow for levels of interdependency and autonomy simultaneously, and in this way creating motivation for success. From a goal-hierarchy perspective, the aim here is to ensure that the various levels of the system's goals (e.g., organisational goals, group goals and individual goals) are aligned and congruent, and in this way development can be maximized.

Group coaching is complicated and there are often multiple perspectives involved, a group coach needs time to integrate these perspectives in ways that scaffold the group development to support goal attainment and systemic understandings. In the current study three sessions of two hours did not seem enough for traction and collaboration in most cases. There must also be a careful consideration of the group size, session timing and length of coaching sessions alongside the organisational aims and support attached to the group coaching engagements. While there is currently no specific empirical research that suggests appropriate structures for group coaching engagements, group coaches at least need to think carefully, in collaboration with stakeholders, how the structure and process contribute to supporting the needs of the organisation, the group and the individuals involved in the coaching process.

Time commitments in group coaching

Gaining commitment for organisational resources is vital for a successful program. This seems like a self-evident statement, but one aspect of "resources" that is often overlooked by organisations is the demands of the program on participants' time. Organisations often engage development activities without careful consideration of the impact involvement may have on the usual roles of participants (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). Such demands are often perceived as being high in individual coaching programs, but are even higher in group coaching programs such as the present study.

A number of participants in the present study reported feeling pressurized regarding the time commitments required, and this seems to have inadvertently impacted the processes of rapport building and commitment required for effective engagement. Group coaches can support success of their engagements through contracting and or negotiating for appropriate resource support for the groups they work with. This may include relief from other organisational commitments or resources to support a participant's time away from their usual role, depending on the specific situation.

Importance of coaches having group coaching expertise and supervision

Based on the feedback across all of the groups it would seem that effectiveness of the group coaching process is best supported when coaches have a degree of mastery in group facilitation. This is important in order to facilitate the development and integration of multiple perspectives in the attainment of multiple levels of hierarchically-related goals. Some of the participants in the present study reported that the group process was not as robust as it could have been, and that it felt as if the group was floundering without clear direction or guidance from the coach.

The coach's role here is to ensure that tensions within the group in terms of competing agendas or tensions between individuals are harnessed to support group goal attainment. Thus coaches need to ensure they have a capacity to work with complexity, have a degree of sector specific understanding in order to offer guidance around sector-relevant change. Group coaching differs considerably from individual one-to-one coaching engagements and a different skill set is required (Hawkins, 2014; Ward, 2008).

Given the apparent complexity of these types of engagements we would suggest that coach group supervision is essential for the coaches to have a forum to share insights, challenges and feedback to the system around patterns and themes that emerge through their engagements. This raises questions around the need for careful consideration of aspects of confidentiality across organisation programs, which would need to be negotiated and transparent across stakeholders.

Summary and Conclusion

While many of the findings and subsequent suggestions presented above are not new or ground breaking, it is heartening to see a degree of consistency emerging across the limited empirical group coaching literature. Our analysis of the feedback from group coaching participants in this pilot study is largely consistent with many of the themes found in the existing group coaching literature, such as it is to date.

In summarizing our findings and recommendations it is clear that careful consideration of group coaching process, structure, aims and expectations needs to occur with respect to the context within which the group coaching is to take place. This degree of detail needs to be clearly communicated to the group coaching participants.

With respect to goals, group coaching may benefit from ensuring there are clear yet broad organisational aims within which specific group and individual level goals can be autonomously developed. Group coaches may benefit from having context- specific knowledge and particular skills around facilitating group process, indicating an important developmental focus for coaches wanting to work in this area. These skills may help to create efficient and focused group coaching sessions which will further support the efficacy of these types of organisational engagements. The development of such skill sets allows coaches working in this space to focus on integrating the complex and multiple perspectives that are intrinsic to group process in general.

Group coaching clearly has much potential. But as has been noted by other researchers and additionally emphasized by the findings from this pilot study, the effective implementation of group coaching programs in large scale complex organisations is not easy. It is hoped that the modicum of insight into the experience and reflections of participants in group coaching, as presented in the present paper, will encourage further research and experimental practice in this emerging area of coaching research and practice. As the coaching industry's understanding of both effective and ineffective group coaching processes increases, we can further develop group coaching practice. In this way the coaching industry can continue to contribute to the development and wellbeing of our clients at the individual, group and systemic levels.

References

- Adler. (2012). The Sociological Ambivalence of Bureaucracy: From Weber Via Gouldner to Marx. *Organization Science*, 23(1), 244-266.
- AMA. (2016). *Public Hospital Report Card*. Barton, ACT: Australian Medical Association.
- Barr, & van Nieuwerburgh. (2015). Teachers' Experiences of an Introductory Coaching Training Workshop in Scotland: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 10(2), 190-204.
- Brown, & Grant. (2010). From Grow to Group: Theoretical Issues and a Practical Model for Group Coaching in Organisations. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 3(1), 30-45.
- Bunker, & Alban. (2012). *The Handbook of Large Group Methods: Creating Systemic Change in Organizations and Communities*. London: John Wiley & Sons.
- Carr, & Peters. (2013). The Experience of Team Coaching: A Dual Case Study. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 8(1), 80-98.
- Cavanagh, & Lane. (2012). Coaching Psychology Coming of Age: The Challenges We Face in the Messy World of Complexity? *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 7(1), 75-90.
- Coates. (2013). Integrated Leadership Development Programmes: Are They Effective and What Role Does Coaching Play? *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 7, 39-55.
- Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee. (2014). Advances in Leader and Leadership Development: A Review of 25years of Research and Theory. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(1), 63-82.
- Florent-Treacy. (2009). Behind the Scenes in the Identity Laboratory: Participants' Narratives of Identity Transition through Group Coaching in a Leadership Development Programme. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 4(1), 71-86.
- Fusco, O'Riordan, & Palmer. (2015). Authentic Leaders Are... Conscious, Competent, Confident, and Congruent: A Grounded Theory of Group Coaching and Authentic Leadership Development. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 10(2), 131-148.
- Godfrey, Andersson-Gare, Nelson, Nilsson, & Ahlstrom. (2013). Coaching Interprofessional Health Care Improvement Teams: The Coachee, the Coach and the Leader Perspectives. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 23(1), 25-37.
- Grajfoner. (2009). Managing Change: Role of Coaching Psychology in Gender Transition. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 5(2), 69-75.
- Grant. (2003). The Impact of Life Coaching on Goal Attainment, Metacognition and Mental Health. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 31(3), 253-263.
- Grant, & O'Connor. (2015). Executive Coaching in Times of Organizational Change: A Vital Support and Developmental Mechanism. In L. Hall (Ed.), *Coaching in Times of Crisis and Transformation* (pp. 121-141). London: Kogan Page.
- Grant, Studholme, Verma, Kirkwood, & Paton. (2016). *Report on the Impact of Participation in the Nsw Health Coaching Panel: Outcomes and Recommendations* Sydney: NSW

- Agency for Clinical Innovation , Ministry of Health and the Health Education Training Institute.
- Hackman, & Wageman. (2005). A Theory of Team Coaching. *Academy of Management Review* Vol 30(2) Apr 2005, 269-287.
- Hauser. (2014). Shape Shifting: A Behavioral Team Coaching Model for Coach Education, Research, and Practice. *Journal of Psychological Issues in Organizational Culture*, 5(2), 48-71.
- Hawkins. (2014). *Leadership Team Coaching: Developing Collective Transformational Leadership*. London: Kogan Page Publishers.
- Ives, & Cox. (2012). *Goal-Focused Coaching: Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Jones, Woods, & Guillaume. (2016). The Effectiveness of Workplace Coaching: A Meta-Analysis of Learning and Performance Outcomes from Coaching. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 89(2), 249-277.
- Kets de Vries. (2005). Leadership Group Coaching in Action: The Zen of Creating High Performance Teams. *Academy of Management Executive*, 19(1), 61-76.
- Muhlberger, & Traut-Mattausch. (2015). Leading to Effectiveness: Comparing Dyadic Coaching and Group Coaching. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 51(2), 198-230.
- Nueman. (2000). *Social Research Methods: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- O'Connor, & Cavanagh. (2013). The Coaching Ripple Effect: The Effects of Developmental Coaching on Wellbeing across Organisational Networks. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 3(2), 1-23.
- O'Connor, & Cavanagh. (2017). Group and Team Coaching. In T. Bachkirova, G. Spence & D. Drake (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Coaching* (pp. 486-504). London: Sage.
- Rauen. (2005). *Handbuch Coaching*. Göttingen: Hogrefe Verlag.
- Rosenthal. (1979). The File Drawer Problem and Tolerance for Null Results. *Psychological Bulletin*, 86(3), 638-641.
- Spector. (1984). Qualitative Research: Data Analysis Framework Generating Grounded Theory Applicable to the Crisis in Science Education. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 21(5), 459-467.
- Stelter, Nielsen, & Wikman. (2011). Narrative-Collaborative Group Coaching Develops Social Capital-a Randomised Control Trial and Further Implications of the Social Impact of the Intervention. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 4(2), 123-137.
- Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen. (2013). Does Coaching Work? A Meta-Analysis on the Effects of Coaching on Individual Level Outcomes in an Organizational Context. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 9(1), 1-18.
- Thornton. (2016). *Group and Team Coaching: The Secret Life of Groups*. London: Routledge.
- Torbrand, & Ellam-Dyson. (2015). The Experience of Cognitive Behavioural Group Coaching with College Students: An Ipa Study Exploring Its Effectiveness. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 10(1), 76-93.
- Vesso. (2015). Strengthening Leader's Impact and Ability to Manage Change through Group Coaching. In P. F. E. Dievernich, O. K. Tokarski & J. Gong (Eds.), *Change Management*

- and the Human Factor: Advances, Challenges and Contradictions in Organizational Development* (pp. 91-107). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Ward. (2008). Towards Executive Change: A Psychodynamic Group Coaching Model for Short Executive Programmes. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 6(1), 67 - 78.
- Whitley. (2013). Group Coaching as Support for Changing Lifestyle for Those Diagnosed with a Long-Term Condition. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 7, 82-99.
- Whitmore. (1996). *Coaching for Performance: Growing People, Performance and Purpose*. London: Nicholas Brealey.
- Williams. (1993). *Applied Sport Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance*. New York: Mayfield Publishing Co.

Sean O'Connor Ph.D. is a practitioner, researcher, and academic within the fields of Coaching, organisational change and leadership development. A lecturer and researcher at the Coaching Psychology Unit, University of Sydney, Dr O'Connor also works with, many leaders across multiple industries supporting personal and organisational development through coaching and systemic change.

Anthony M. Grant, Ph.D., is the Director of the Coaching Psychology Unit and the University of Sydney. Widely recognized as a key pioneer of Coaching Psychology he has over 100 publications and has won numerous national and international awards for his coaching research and practice. He also enjoys playing loud (but unfortunately not very Claptonesque) blues guitar.

Ingrid Studholme (MsC Coaching Psychology) is a Sydney-based executive coach, facilitator and researcher. She brings her experience as a leader in organisations together with research and practice in evidence based coaching to her work in corporate, education, health, not-for-profit and social enterprise contexts.