

CFI Leadership & Coaching Dialogue™



Why Team Coaching Matters

Can a leadership team benefit from the external support of a coach, just like a leader can benefit from the support of an executive coach?

INAUGURAL ISSUE
Volume I, Issue 1, November 2025



Acknowledgements

This edition on Team Coaching would not have been possible without the solid body of work around the subject that we at CFI have been able to do over the years.

This has been powered by Ganesh Anantharaman who is our Team Coaching Practice Leader and the first Program Director of CFI's Advanced Program in Team Coaching. You will find his piece here in the journal.

CFI is thankful to Rosemary Viswanath, the Managing Trustee of Group Relations India and a leading global practitioner of Group Relations work, for her piece on some of the unconscious processes that impact teams. We are immensely grateful for her support as a facilitator in our Advanced Program on Team Coaching.

CFI thanks Ruby Thapar – a seasoned CFI coach – for sharing her personal experience of being a Team Coach.

Finally we thank our Team Coaches for documenting their experiences which has helped us share some of them in this journal. We are grateful to the entire team coaching community of CFI for helping us shape this practice and reinforcing our faith in the CFI model of Team Coaching.

Editors

Ganesh Chella & Archana Madhavan

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CFI Leadership & Coaching Dialogue is Born

On our 20th anniversary, we are honoured to dedicate to the Indian world of business and organisations, a journal that celebrates, examines, illustrates and illuminates all aspects of leadership and leader development.

Yes, through this maiden edition, we are delighted to launch the **CFI Leadership & Coaching Dialogue**.

While this is a CFI publication, it is our earnest desire that it serves as a thought leadership platform for the hundreds of wise women and men in India who have such an informed and insightful view of leadership and coaching that the country can benefit from.



This quarterly will focus on one single theme in each of its editions and do it justice. We will endeavour to stay focused on examining subjects around leadership, leader development and coaching, influenced by our experiences in the Indian context.

As many parts of the world find themselves in turmoil of various kinds, much hope is placed on India. Despite all our challenges, this hope is well placed. While millions across our country are toiling hard to realise their hopes and aspirations, they need insights and inspiration. They need tools, they need resources. They need to find places where things are shining and flourishing. That is what the **CFI Leadership & Coaching Dialogue** is planning to do.

For years, we as a nation chose to look entirely westward for insights, ideas and inspiration. The **CFI Leadership & Coaching Dialogue** is our effort to promote and celebrate Indian thought on Leadership and Leader Development.

Join us as we embark on this exciting journey! Cheer us but also challenge us!

Warm Regards

Ganesh Chella
Co-Founder

1 | A Case for Team Coaching

The organisation has a sound vision and strategy. It has a full-fledged leadership team. All of them are competent in what they do. They have a formal leadership forum with a clear role for the forum and a clear cadence of meetings.

Yet, the leader of the team has this sense that something is “off”. The forum is not performing as it should. The leaders as a collective are not doing what was envisioned. There is a constant gap between what they promise and what they deliver.

It is not that the CEO has not been concerned about team effectiveness or has not tried a few things. There have been strategic off-sites, a facilitator-led team-building session, psychometric assessments to understand what’s holding them back, and even a motivational speaker coming over and addressing them.

It is not that things are broken, but clearly the CEO knows they can do much better as a collective.

Does this sound like a team that you know or lead or have been a part of?

As pioneers in the use of executive coaching in India, we have often had to confront the hard truth that, beyond a point, developing the individual leader may not be enough. The leadership team needs to be effective as well. This difference between leader development and leadership effectiveness has been a great source of concern among many coaches and leader development experts.

That has led many to ask the question: Can a leadership team benefit from the external support of a coach, just like a leader can benefit from the support of an executive coach?

...beyond a point, developing the individual leader may not be enough. The leadership team needs to be effective as well.

In our inaugural edition, we focus on a relatively new approach to making organisational teams effective – Team Coaching.

Team coaching is today where executive coaching found itself 20 years ago. An intervention that has the potential to bring about tangible improvements in the effectiveness of teams and organisations but mostly not yet understood or appreciated by the stakeholders that it can benefit.



In this edition we present a practitioner's perspective on Team Coaching, and more particularly some of the distinctive principles that help in its effectiveness.

Through real life client stories and actual Team Coaching experiences, we examine conditions where Team Coaching can add value, the possible outcomes it can result in and the complexities which may derail its potential.

We also offer the perspective of a Team Coach – what it means to be there in the room with a team that is grappling with their challenges.

By clarifying the nature and scope of Team Coaching and sharing our practical experiences at CFI, this edition attempts to advance the understanding of Team Coaching and its application in addressing organisational challenges.

If you are an organisational leader who is concerned about making your team or teams more effective, we are sure that this edition will empower you with ideas that you can use.

2 | The Silent Killer

A dysfunctional team is in many ways a silent killer. The world outside may not notice the ills for a long time. For many of us who are analytically inclined, there are no metrics that can be used to measure this. At least for a while.

The term silent killer is used in the medical field because some illnesses which are hard to diagnose in the early stages but also easy to cure then, are easy to diagnose at later stages but hard to cure at that stage.

A dysfunctional team is in many ways a silent killer. The world outside may not notice the ills for a long time. For many of us who are analytically inclined, there are no metrics that can be used to measure this. At least for a while.

However, if one were to look deeper, one can start noticing things. Decisions do not get taken. Those decisions that are taken are not implemented. What appears to have been discussed and agreed on is not acted upon. A member of the team who is under pressure and is facing a specific functional or business crisis feels alone. Some of the members, whose roles are in conflict by design, end up not seeing eye to eye, even interpersonally. Leadership meetings are not enjoyable experiences. Good conversations are not happening.

While we are well equipped to spot individual performance failures, we do not have the tools to spot team failures. For this very reason, to the world outside and even to the board, this remains a silent killer.

It may be a huge surprise that a subject that is so important, with a direct bearing on performance, receives so little attention. We aim to change that.

While we are well equipped to spot individual performance failures, we do not have the tools to spot team failures.

3 | What is Team Coaching?

Team Coaching is the process of building and developing the team as a system so the team has the capacity to do its work and find its own solutions.

The focus of Team Coaching is on observing and intervening in the group processes of the team to make those processes more effective. This is achieved by observing the team as one entity, seeing the interplay between members, calling out the patterns, the said and the unsaid, the inclusions and exclusions, the voices which are heard and those that are ignored.

The coaches work with both the leader and the team members. They go beyond facilitating a single team event and pay attention to the long-term capability-building of the team.

In Team Coaching, coaches stay away from the content of team deliberations or directing the team towards a decision or solving a problem. Team Coaching focuses on **how** the team works, thereby leading to better team performance.

Team Coaching has a strong interpersonal dimension because healthy interpersonal relationships are critical to teamwork.

Teams know what they need to do, but often something stops them from doing it. Team Coaching, when implemented well, helps them uncover why and work on those reasons which are usually below the level of consciousness. (e.g.: a sense of competition, old vs new members, not accepting the leader and so on.)

The Team Coaching process focuses on building trust, role empathy, ownership and accountability to bring about collaborative synergy.

The coaches work with both the leader and the team members. They go beyond facilitating a single team event and pay attention to the long-term capability-building of the team.



4 | The Business Case for Team Effectiveness

While we have touched upon the dimension of team dysfunctionalities, that may not always be the only driver for a focus on teams.

There are three significant shifts around us that appear to accentuate the importance of teams to secure business success and the competitive edge that team effectiveness can offer:

New Demands on Managers and Leaders

Today, achieving business results depends significantly on the ability of managers and leaders to transcend role boundaries, functional boundaries and even organisational boundaries. As important as influencing without authority, is collaborating without force.

Collaboration has become a prized capability. Matrix structures, global teams and shared resources are placing increasing demands on individuals to work with others to achieve results.

New business models and resultant structures are designed for conflicts and tensions that can only be resolved through human effort to work together.

The Leader at the Top

Leading a business or organisation is clearly no longer a lone pursuit. The task of leadership is increasingly a shared endeavour. No one person, however competent, has all the answers or, for that matter, all the authority.

CEOs in most organisations are unable to get things done all by themselves or their own brilliance. They need to rely on others sharing the task of leadership. Beyond creating purpose, CEOs spend enormous time and effort aligning forces within and across organisations towards that purpose.



The Socio-Cultural Lens

For many decades, Indian organisations were characterised by a strong collectivist orientation in terms of respect for hierarchy, group loyalty and harmony, and submission to the authority of the team leader. This often allowed the leader to lead and team members chose to follow out of loyalty. Teamwork was about followership and at best supressing individual differences.

Today, Indian organisations are in varying degrees of transition from a collectivist culture to an individualistic culture, depending on the nature of the industry, its ownership type and of course the generational profile of its leaders.

In this process of transition, there appear to be understandable pulls and pressures between maintaining group harmony and loyalty and honouring individual autonomy and freedom. There is a clash between respect for hierarchy and seniority and respect for competence. There is a conflict between egalitarianism and power differences.

In this phase of transition, with a clash of cultures, styles and approaches, the ability to collaborate appears compromised.

Our own professional experiences have shown that individualistic cultures, especially in organisational settings, seem to be in a better position to promote teamwork when it comes to speed, accountability and innovation, for the following reasons:

These cultures value clarity in roles, responsibilities, and outcomes reducing ambiguity and friction, making collaboration smoother.

In these cultures, people choose to be part of teams based on shared goals or interests, rather than being obligated by hierarchy or tradition, leading to greater ownership of team outcomes.

These cultures encourage people to express their unique perspectives, which can enrich team discussions and decision-making.

They practise more direct communication and open feedback.

They are of course focused on getting the task accomplished.

5 | Typical Needs that Team Coaching can Fulfil

We were recently in conversation with the CEO of a large engineering company who was discussing with us the need for his top team to collaborate better.

"We have three business verticals serving different customer segments, and these have until now operated quite independently.

However, technology has changed many things around how we design and deliver solutions. Economic headwinds have also put pressure on costs and profitability.

To sustain our growth ambitions, we need to build a few horizontal capabilities quickly.

We also need to collectively address how we can achieve our 5-year growth goals.

Unfortunately, my direct reports are very involved in their own verticals. They are not even seeing the need to come together and address these enterprise-level issues.

And then, even when we meet, driving agreement on anything of common importance is so hard."

Clearly, this CEO wanted his leaders to share the task of leadership with him and believed that they needed help for this shift to happen.

Of course, we must admit that he did not ask for Team Coaching because he was not aware that such a thing existed.

When we listened to him and explained how Team Coaching with a certain variation could help him, he readily agreed.

Promoting shared leadership in a team culture that is used to looking up to the leader to lead is a common need that Team Coaching can address.

Let us look at another example.

The Founder and MD of a software company was sharing with us his concerns about his leadership team.

"My direct reports are all functional experts. They are good at what they do. But then, finally, the pressure to achieve numbers is on me. If we do not achieve what we committed, I am answerable to the board and my investors."

This Founder and MD was expecting his team members to step up and take ownership.

He wanted them to take operational decisions, challenge each other and the leader too! He wanted his team members to hold one another accountable while also having empathy for the role that each one was carrying out. These are common needs that Team Coaching can fulfil.

In order to transition to this style of functioning, he was clear that he and his team leaders needed structured support.

Of course, even in this case, the Founder did not ask specifically for Team Coaching because he did not even know that something like this existed.

Here are some of the most common needs that Team Coaching can address:

1. Helping a team adapt and respond to rapid changes because of external forces or internal organisational shifts
2. Helping a team gear up for audacious or very aspirational goals or collaborating on mission critical projects
3. Helping a team align to a new leader, new vision, new goals and strategies
4. Improving communication, collaboration, and relationships among team members, enhancing morale and reducing stress
5. Addressing conflicts and disagreements in a constructive manner, embracing positive conflict

The overarching goal is to enable the team to deliver a higher level of performance.

In many ways, Team Coaching helps prepare the soil for the seeds of progress to bear fruit.

The overarching goal is to enable the team to deliver a higher level of performance.

A SUCCESSFUL TEAM COACHING EXPERIENCE

Here is the experience of an organisation that proactively leveraged Team Coaching to manage the integration of two opposing teams. Team Coaching helped them make this paradigm shift successfully.

This is the story of ABC, an organisation that, like all others these days, had to make some radical changes to adapt and grow. They were a financial services organisation which had a Sales Team (ST) and a Customer Service Team (CST). They had previously reported to different heads but were now integrated into a single new unified team.

THE PROBLEM

Predictably, there was significant conflict and distrust between the two formerly competing teams by virtue of the sheer nature of their roles. There was a palpable sense of anxiety and stress. When the Team Coaches met the sponsor of this engagement, he explained that some of the sales team members and customer service team members actually just “could not see eye to eye”. The CST, in particular, was anxious about the changes, as they now had new sales responsibilities that were outside their previous roles.

THE SOLUTION

The sponsor welcomed Team Coaching to facilitate these integration challenges and develop a more collaborative mindset which was critical to the organisation's success. The sponsor said, “We don't know how these hitherto competing teams are going to work together, but we only know this is a 'must achieve' agenda for the organisation.”

Coaches worked with the team, raising awareness of how they functioned, helping with role empathy, eliciting real fears and facilitating feedback and authentic dialogue. As the engagement progressed, the initially apprehensive team members started opening up, embracing with relief the safe space that the coaches had created.

Assumptions and perceptions were clarified, insights shared, and the team moved closer to having shared understanding. With each passing session, elephants in the room were surfaced and worked with.

There were fears, there were epiphanies but most of all, there was now a shared understanding of the task ahead and the role each one had to play.

THE OUTCOMES

The Team Coaching engagement led to several positive outcomes. The customer service team was able to start selling successfully with the guidance and support of the sales team. With this, for the first time ever, they independently achieved Rs 8 Crore in sales revenue.

There was a notable increase in mutual trust, respect, and appreciation within the integrated team. Communication quality and frequency also improved significantly. The team was determined to cascade the new collaborative mindset and integration to their team members as well.

Here is what some of the team members said.

Team Coaching facilitated the development of our listening skills, our ability to look at things from different perspectives, and helped us support each other and adapt to the integration faster.

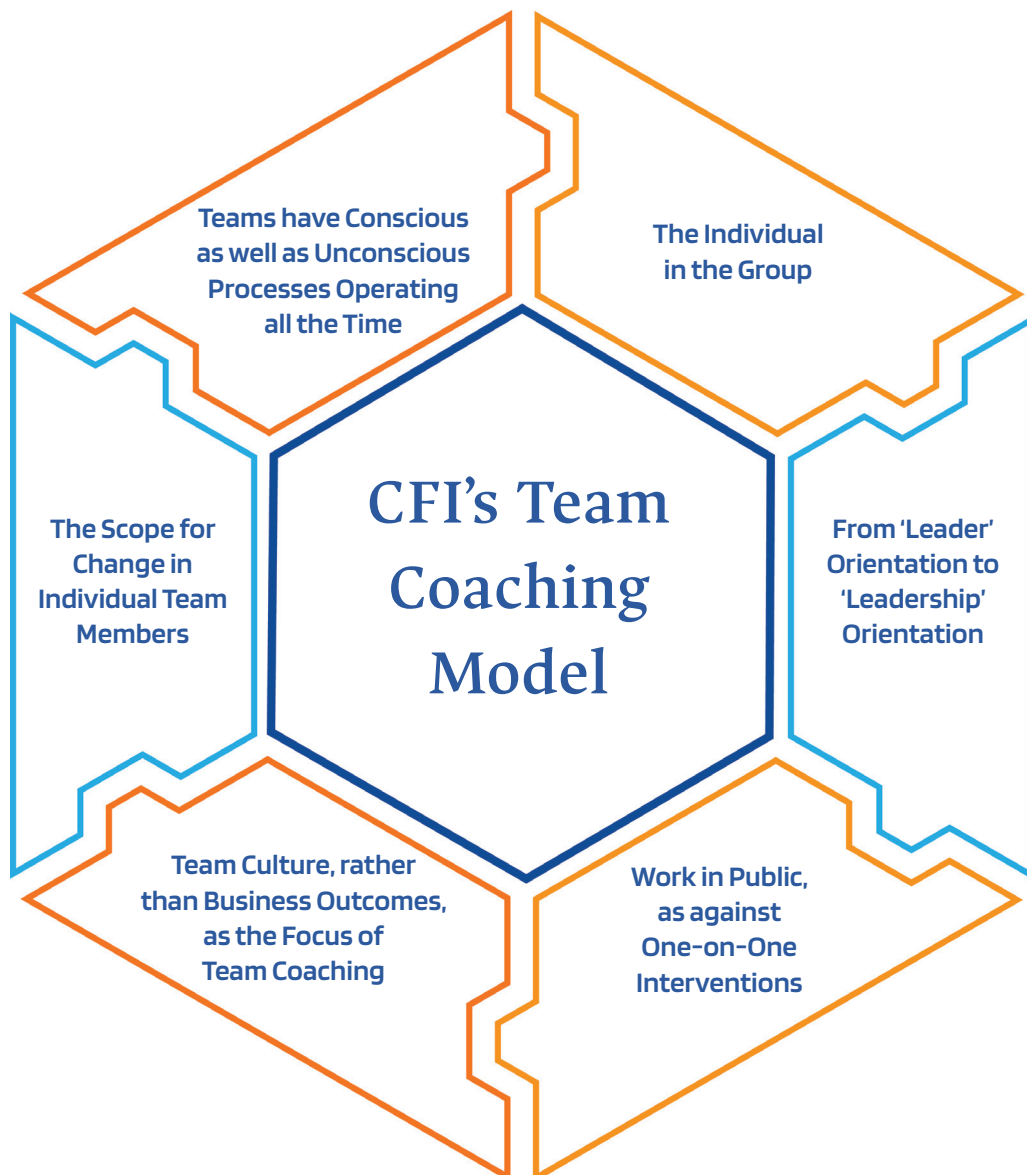
We have moved from conflict to collaboration."

Team Coaching doesn't just result in new processes. It reshapes mindsets, enabling teams to unlock their true potential. This experience underscores how intentional interventions can turn competing factions into powerful collaborators driving business success. An immensely satisfying experience for both the coaches and the organisation!

To understand how this transformation happens, it is essential to get familiar with some basic concepts and principles that guide Team Coaching, as practised by CFI. These principles have been adapted from the theory of human processes and group dynamics.

6 | Principles of CFI's model of Team Coaching

Grounded in the human process orientation, as against relying on tools and techniques, and based on the Group Relations framework that pays attention to group dynamics, particularly at the level of the unconscious, CFI's Team Coaching Model is oriented by the following six principles:



1 Teams have Conscious as well as Unconscious Processes Operating all the Time: Paying attention to the conscious processes alone (for example, role clarity for members in a team) is not enough, because what may be perceived as an issue of role clarity may be, at the unconscious level, a question of hierarchy in the team, about whose voice counts and whose voice does not. Unless the latter is addressed, focusing on the former alone is not going to make the team more effective.

Quite often, individuals may be unconsciously 'set up' by the team to take on roles that the team as a whole wants to avoid.

2 The Individual in the Group: While it may be tempting to focus on the individual personalities of the team members (which may have a role to play in team dynamics), it is more important to consider the question: **What does this individual represent for the team as a whole? What function is she/he playing for the team?** Quite often, individuals may be unconsciously 'set up' by the team to take on roles that the team as a whole wants to avoid. For instance, a team member who is outspoken about her/his views may easily be set up by the team to do all the plain-speaking on behalf of the team as a whole, so that other members can play it safe, and avoid the risk of being transparent. An unfortunate consequence is that the said individual is branded 'aggressive' or 'blunt', and is held solely accountable for her/his behaviour. If a team has to become truly inclusive, it needs to examine what roles it sets up for one or a few members to take on, on behalf of the team.

3 From 'Leader' Orientation to 'Leadership' Orientation: As against focusing primarily on the behaviour of the team leader (leader orientation), CFI's Team Coaching model shifts the focus to acts of leadership by team members. The premise being that for a team to be effective and fully utilise its potential, **all team members must demonstrate leadership by doing something that supports the task.** It could be something as simple as inviting silent team members to speak (an act of inclusion), to something more challenging such as questioning established norms in the team (act of challenging the status quo). It is these acts of leadership by many, or all team members that allows the team to live up to its potential, and not just the acts of the team leader, important as the latter may be..

4 Work in Public, as Against One-on-One Interventions: Team Coaching emphasises the need to discuss, offer opinions, challenge each other's ideas, and if necessary, confront behaviours of other team members, all in the presence of the whole team. This ability to make public (transparent) what is usually reserved for one-on-one interactions is the biggest game changer in the team's effectiveness to tackle challenges that arise in the course of their work as a team. This may take time, and it involves some risk-taking by the team members, but is critical for the team to move forward on trust and cohesion.

Team Culture, rather than Business Outcomes, as the Focus of Team Coaching:

5

CFI's Team Coaching model focuses on aspects of team culture that are embedded and therefore have long-term consequences, rather than on business outcomes, which are truly the preserve of the team leader and team members. Team culture includes paying attention to authority dynamics in the team; the divide between the old and new team members; the various kinds of hierarchies that operate in the team; the roles that are performed as well as those that are abandoned in the team; and more. Team members slowly come to realise the impact of these processes upon business outcomes.

6

The Scope for Change in Individual Team Members:

While the CFI model focuses on the 'group-as-a-whole' framework in Team Coaching, this does not mean that there is no scope for individual change. Individual team members are encouraged to examine the impact of their styles and preferences on the team task as well as on the team relationships. 'How do I become a better team player' is one of the focus areas of Team Coaching, and team members are encouraged to explore this question with their team colleagues in a team context, so that multiple views are available to the team member to decide what to retain and what to change about one's style of functioning. Also, if everyone's change agenda is known to everyone else, instances of unconscious 'set up' of individuals can be reduced.

These six principles of Team Coaching, taken together, prepare the team to leverage its true potential and apply it towards the business challenges that it faces every day.

– Ganesh Anantharaman

These six principles of Team Coaching prepare the team to leverage its true potential.

7 | How the Team Coaching Process Works

In our experience, every Team Coaching engagement has been different, with each team facing a unique set of challenges and needing different interventions to help it progress towards collaboration and cohesiveness. While these complexities influence the interventions of the Team Coaches, Team Coaching operates within the scaffoldings of a well-structured process that is designed to raise the team's collective awareness, propelling it to make changes to its processes and dynamics.

Structured over a span of six months, the Team Coaching process (as practised by CFI), is not just a cognitive exercise but a journey of emotional commitment to being and working as a cohesive team. Here we share with you the overview of this process involving the following elements:

Pre-engagement

The pre-engagement phase is intended to serve three purposes:

1. Ascertain that the client's problem can indeed be addressed through Team Coaching
2. Ascertain that the team is willing to engage in this process, with an open mind or at least with ambivalence
3. Educate the team about Team Coaching, including what it is and how it will work

It is critical to have pre-engagement meetings with all stakeholders (or at least a representative section of them) to understand the challenges from their point of view and diagnose the underlying issues beyond the stated ones. The first step is to explore the problem deeply and confirm that Team Coaching is indeed the appropriate solution.

The next step is to ascertain the readiness of the team members (including the leader) to engage fully with the Team Coaching process. We do not expect a high level of enthusiasm or for team members to jump at this idea. We expect that they are at least ambivalent about the possibilities. Resistance is what one would like to avoid.

Teams themselves are often unaware of what Team Coaching entails.

Teams themselves are often unaware of what Team Coaching entails. In our experience they expect Team Coaches to share inputs on leadership and teamwork. They expect case studies and simulations. Team Coaching however, requires the team to observe themselves and the others in the team; the patterns, the dynamics and the behaviours that come in the way of their cohesiveness. It is important that teams understand this. Else the engagement could take more time to gain momentum as team members slowly understand that the Team Coaches are not going to 'teach' them anything!

The quality of the pre-engagement conversations sets the intervention up for success.

A Pair of Team Coaches

With Team Coaching being a far more complex intervention, it has been our experience that two Team Coaches working together is far more effective than a lone Team Coach working with a whole team.

When two Team Coaches work together, one may intervene while the other is paying attention to group responses to the interventions and vice versa. With Team Coaching having many moving pieces, we believe it is best for a team of two coaches to work with a team of leaders.

Discovery Conversations

Once the team and the team leader have understood and bought into the need for the Team Coaching intervention, the coaches initiate one-on-one discovery dialogues with each member of the team. These conversations are diagnostic with an appreciative approach as Team Coaches seek each member's perspective on the strengths of the team in addition to eliciting their wishes for the team towards greatness.

Team Coaching Sessions

It is only after establishing this foundational relationship that Team Coaching sessions begin at full steam. Sharing the inputs gathered from the interviews, coaches make here-and-now interventions that help the team process the data and arrive at some critical behavioural goals it wants to work on.

In Team Coaching sessions, unlike training or facilitation sessions, coaches neither get into content nor direct the team towards making a decision or solving a particular problem.

They focus on processes happening in the team – who the team turns to for decisions, what are the sub groups and partnerships that exist between members, how the team responds to the team leader, how it deals with conflict and so on.

The team begins to see itself through the eyes of the coaches and works through the observations and patterns that are called out. For the first time, the team is forced to see itself as one entity as interventions of the coaches do not focus on any one individual but on all of them.

For example, a Team Coach might say: "The team seems to be using humour to avoid facing the elephant in the room". The said team then usually stops in its tracks and is forced to consider whether this is indeed the case, leading to rich conversations between the members.

With each session, the team begins to become more conscious of the patterns that it seems to demonstrate till they reach the stage where the team members themselves start making interventions and calling out the patterns that are helping or hindering the team.

In the final session, teams discuss the increased trust and transparency created through the coaching sessions. They share their experiences and the changes they have made and seen through the engagement. By this stage team members have begun taking over the role of Team Coaches, calling out one another and holding each other accountable in an empathetic manner.

An important part of the process is the check-in with the sponsor and the team leader, where alignment and progress is validated. Team Coaches will also review observable shifts and how changes can be supported further by the organisation. In those cases where the leader is also the sponsor for the engagement (which is often the case), it takes more finesse to maintain the trust of the group while also interacting with the team leader in their role as sponsor.

A Flexible Approach

Team Coaching is seldom offered in its purity. There is need for flexibility and scope for creativity in the manner in which it is offered.

Team Coaching is seldom offered in its purity. There is need for flexibility and scope for creativity in the manner in which it is offered. There might be need for a shorter format when the team needs support to engage in deep conversations about future strategy and the team leader does not want to be burdened with the task of holding space.

It may be combined with some one-on-one coaching where the need is justified.

Team Coaches may also use some structured experiences and tools to hasten the team awareness processes.

Of course, the biggest flexibility we have had to be prepared for is in terms of working with global teams that often engage remotely. That can be quite challenging but is inevitable.

CLIENT STORY

This case presents a success story where the team leader was also the sponsor.

THE CONTEXT

The senior engineering team of an organisation was at a critical juncture, striving to drive innovation and bring new products to market that could scale the company's growth. The team responsible for these goals faced significant challenges. The deep expertise it brought to the table was compromised by interpersonal conflicts and mistrust that hampered collaboration and therefore team effectiveness.

Recognising the need for change, the organisation engaged CFI to coach the leadership team.

THE STUDY

Through one-on-one conversations and a team effectiveness survey, the coaches brought out the fact that leaders were working in silos and trusted not more than one or two of their peers. This mistrust came in the way of open collaboration. There were many elephants in the room, eroding trust and causing unresolved tensions.

Leaders were also so focused on leveraging their expertise that it often detracted from achieving team objectives and from wearing the enterprise hat. They were also overwhelmed by the operational tasks that came their way as they found comfort in handling many important things themselves as opposed to delegating them.

Coaches supported this team in processing these findings and arriving at goals they would like to work on through this journey.

CHALLENGES FACED AND TURNING POINTS

Some members were initially reluctant to voice concerns. However, the introduction of structured feedback sessions helped break this barrier. The feedback also revealed that a team member's perceived political behaviour created mistrust. Addressing this in a safe, open environment allowed the team to engage and begin resolving it constructively.

Surfacing the "undiscussables" was a pivotal moment, as it allowed the team to confront long-standing tensions and develop norms for addressing them openly in the future.

Leaders learned and helped each other to let go of operational details, enabling them to focus on strategic priorities. There was also a structural change made by the organisation which provided more clarity to the leaders, and which supported the direction the team wanted to take.

TEAM LEADER AND SPONSOR

This was also a sensitive engagement as the team leader was also the sponsor. We needed to interact with him in an open manner so that it did not disturb the equilibrium we had created in the coaching sessions. Quick informal catch ups during the breaks were sufficient to stay aligned. The team leader also took it upon himself to lead by example and was the first to put up his hand to receive feedback!

When it came to a meeting with the CEO, we decided against doing it with the leader of the team alone, and instead took the whole team along. This move ensured that the trust between coaches, leader and the team only got stronger.

Each of these was a situation that could have diluted the work that had been done so far. It is important for Team Coaches to continuously keep testing the waters and adapt to what emerges, in the best interests of the team.

FINAL OUTCOME

The coaching journey led to tangible and intangible transformations.

Trust and collaboration improved significantly, with previously clashing members working together constructively. Alignment on shared goals reduced silos and enabled the team to focus on the company's ambitious growth objectives.

Sensitive issues were surfaced and addressed, creating a culture of openness and mutual respect.

The new level of relationships established at this level had a cascading effect and resulted in even their teams working much better with each other

8 | What It Takes to be a Team Coach

Being a Team Coach is very different from being an executive coach. While an executive coach has the complexities of one senior leader to deal with, Team Coaching requires coaches to deal with multiple complex personalities at the same time.

It requires one to hone the skills of continuous observation, hypothesis formation and diagnosis of the team in the here-and-now. This particular competence calls for intensive training and significant practice. One learns best through the experience of being a group member themselves.

It is also important that the Team Coaches have worked on themselves and do not allow their unconscious needs and concerns to be projected on to their clients.

Team Coaches will need a high degree of courage to display candour, call out truths which the team may not accept and make powerful interventions that move the team towards its stated goals.

An additional layer of complexity is working with a peer coach, a relationship that can turn out to be complex if the coaches are not well aligned and don't have a trusting relationship themselves. Their relationship very often serves as a role model of effective teamwork to the client team and is therefore important for the success of the engagement.

Like in executive coaching, it is not important that Team Coaches have to be from the same industry or function that the team being coached is from. It is however important for Team Coaches to have a background of business that helps them understand the context of the engagement. It is actually helpful if the Team Coaches are from a different industry so they are not drawn to the content and can stick to the process!

However, clients may expect otherwise and that is a barrier that needs effort to break.

At CFI, we insist that a Team Coach has to be a seasoned executive coach because that gives them the grounding in our values, our conversational abilities and process adherence.

It is also important that the Team Coaches have worked on themselves and do not allow their unconscious needs and concerns to be projected on to their clients.

9 | Team Coaching and Other Team Interventions

Team Coaching is not a panacea to all the challenges that teams face.

Team Coaching is not a panacea to all the challenges that teams face. Nor is it the only way to address concerns that team leaders have about their teams.

Working with a team is also different from working with a group.

It is important to acknowledge these differences and complementary disciplines and not disregard their critical value.

Team Coaching and Team Facilitation

Facilitation is the art and practice of guiding groups through processes that enable shared understanding, effective collaboration, and meaningful change – without directing or dominating the content. Facilitation is to enable. In that sense Team Coaching is a form of facilitation. The skills of facilitation are central to Team Coaching because it rests on understanding group processes.

However, a facilitator's role as it is commonly understood is somewhat different from the role of a Team Coach.

A facilitator might be called in by a team to facilitate a specific event like a strategic off-site or a vision and values workshop.

However, a Team Coach works with the team over a sustained period to strengthen its capacity to make tangible and sustainable changes in the way the team works together.

Team Coaching and Team-Building

While Team Coaching can be considered a team-building intervention, in a practical sense, team-building is more event based, consists of activities not directly related to the work task and usually creates a sense of camaraderie and team spirit.

Of course, team-building efforts and activities have an invaluable place in the ability of a team to break ice, get acquainted, enhance its awareness of how it responds to dimensions like competition and cooperation, how tasks are attended to and how trust is built.

Team-building activities can certainly lower some barriers and increase camaraderie. However, once the team is back in a performance-related environment, the sustainability of this progress often gives way to competing resources and objectives.

That having been said, many teams may just need a good dose of regular team-building efforts, facilitated skilfully.

Team Coaching and Group Coaching

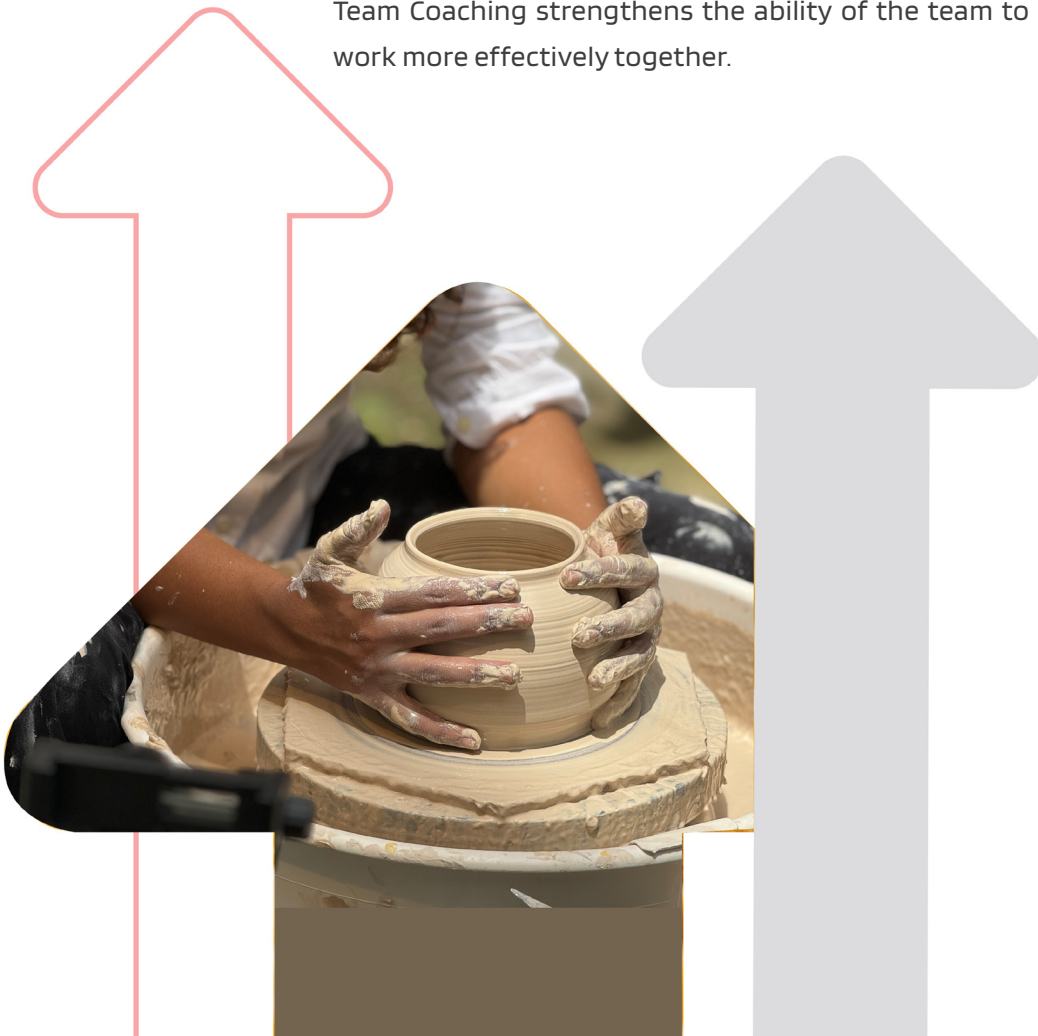
These two terms are unfortunately used interchangeably though they are very different in many ways.

Group coaching is a method of coaching a group of individuals in an organisation who have a common coaching need and can benefit from working together to address that need for reasons of efficiency and peer learning potential.

It must be noted that this is really a learning group and is not an intact team or even from the same function or level.

For example, if both the sales teams and the customer service teams of an organisation need to strengthen their customer centricity, then group coaching would be the right intervention. It focuses on strengthening individual capabilities in the context of a common need of the group.

Team Coaching strengthens the ability of the team to become more cohesive and work more effectively together.



10 | Team Coaching has Challenges

While we believe in the power of Team Coaching and have enough evidence to support its use, we also know that it does not always work.

We once undertook an assignment for a team where the leader was extremely excited about the Team Coaching engagement and got his whole team excited about it too. However, the organisation was going through a major restructuring which impacted this team as well. This resulted in tremendous uncertainty both for the leader as well as the members of the team. We had to bring the assignment to a premature end.

Our learning was that while organisations can be ambitious and bring in changes, if the stability of the team itself is suspect, it is not a good time to get into Team Coaching. (However enthused the leader may be!)

Another situation where Team Coaching is bound to fail is when it is imposed on a team without the team members' genuine buy-in. Then coaches are met with high resistance and there is also an insecurity that stems from the team leader who is now under the impression that the organisation is turning to Team Coaching because he or she has been found wanting in their role.

A third situation where Team Coaching may not help is when the team constitution itself is erroneous. There need to be basic skills and resources available to meet its objectives. In their absence, Team Coaching is a wasted effort.

A fourth situation where Team Coaching may not work is if the team size itself is too large. At CFI we believe that we can work with a team of 8 to a maximum of 12 members. Any number larger than that can make the intervention unwieldy. It can lead to the formation of subgroups, people tuning out, social loafing and so on, which compromise the focus of the Team Coaching.

At a more subtle level, Team Coaching can involve a level of abstractness that those needing control and structure will find difficult to deal with. However, it is in these spaces of uncertainty that the team discovers who they truly are. Here are some of the other challenges that Team Coaching can pose:

Team coaches have to be extremely careful to ensure that the team does not start depending on them for direction. It is an untrained coach who feels fulfilled by the dependence of the team. Like in executive coaching, effective Team Coaches make themselves progressively unnecessary.

As teams go on their paths of discovery, there will be times when they do not like what they see. In a convolution of the term 'kill the messenger', the team can collude to view the Team Coaches as the 'enemy' and can provide strong opposition to coaching interventions. This calls for significant skill and maturity from the coaches to stay untriggered, hold the space, and allow the team to work through the discomfort until they reach a more thoughtful understanding of their own dynamics, behaviours, and the role the coaches play.



We had one instance where the team was not comfortable with what was surfaced by a psychometric instrument used by the coaches. They veered towards finding fault with the tool and criticising it instead of choosing to process the results and taking away what they found useful. This experience has led us to stay away from using psychometric instruments and has renewed our belief in the power of here-and-now observations to move the team forward.

On rare occasions, we find that leaders may need support to process the happenings in the Team Coaching sessions and work on themselves to be better team contributors. In such situations we offer limited individual coaching sessions. However, to ensure that individual conversations do not play out in the Team Coaching space, we make sure that Team Coaches do not do individual coaching for members of the team that they are coaching. Different executive coaches work with individuals on their personal agendas that are surfaced by the Team Coaching sessions.

Working only
on the team
sometimes
becomes futile if
there are larger
systemic issues at
play.

In Team Coaching we are dealing with multiple senior leaders bringing their own past experiences into the team. We are also dealing with systemic pressures that the team is facing. Coaching therefore needs to ensure that at both levels, teams arrive at ways of working that move the team forward. Working only on the team sometimes becomes futile if there are larger systemic issues at play.

One example of this was that of a team that sought to work more collaboratively and get its leaders to wear the enterprise hat. However, it was governed by an incentive system where the variable pay was based only on the performance of one's vertical and not on the performance of the organisation as a whole!

With these and many other complexities which arise, **working with supervision** becomes a must for Team Coaches as it is with executive coaches. In spite of there being two Team Coaches working on each engagement, CFI ensures that they are provided with a coach supervisor who is able to offer a fresh perspective with the advantage of being outside the engagement. The supervisor also checks on the chemistry and understanding between the two Team Coaches. This is something that is very visible and tangible to the team being coached and a relationship that clearly needs to be role modelled.

11 | All is Well

What comes in the way of teams acknowledging challenges in how they work?

If you meet an acquaintance or a colleague and ask “how are you doing?” they are likely to say – ah, all is fine. On family WhatsApp groups it is rarely acknowledged that one of the members is under stress or that there are relationship tensions. The prevailing culture is of revealing only the positives. Often, only medical emergencies or challenges get mention, sometimes after the event. The same is true with teams at work. An inquiry, when the whole team is present, about how they are working is likely to get a “things are fine” response.

But there may be much that is simmering beneath the surface. Some of these discontents are what team members are aware of. If you happen to have confidential, one-on-one meetings with the members, they may reveal some of these areas of tension, grievance, and dissatisfaction. But there are also areas that are lodged even deeper beneath the surface, that members of the team do not really have a handle on, and only the symptoms are acknowledged, if at all. These are unconscious dynamics that hinder teamwork.

Let's explore some of these conscious and unconscious reasons, many of which connect to CFI's Team Coaching principles. We bring them back here to highlight how these principles may be resisted, but unconsciously.

There are many conscious reasons why there is resistance to acknowledge challenges and difficulties in how teams work with one another. For example:

Work Culture

Teams share work cultures with the wider system they are part of, viz. the rest of the department and the whole organisation. When organisation cultures encourage reflection on 'how are we working' they are likely to have the following aspects in their work culture: minimal hierarchies about who can raise difficult questions to whom; the belief that workplaces give rise to emotions (particularly difficult ones) and that expressing them is legitimate in workplaces; the idea that conflict is a natural part of working with others, and therefore people do not rush to paper over or harmonise when differences are aired, in the fear that this may lead to unmanageable conflict.

Teams share work cultures with the wider system they are part of.

If these elements are not experienced as a natural part of the existing work culture, team members will hesitate to raise issues about the how and why of working together, and stick to the technical 'content' as they are never sure it will be welcomed. Also, because this is not part of the culture, team members do not develop the skills to reflect, to build on each other's insights, to listen attentively, to puzzle about what an individual member's experience may be saying about the team as a whole etc. These are skills that need to be built and nurtured consciously in teams.

Leadership Styles

While this point is part of the work culture, it is also worth special mention. In teams and systems where importance is given to the leader (a single position located in a person, usually designated) and not to leadership (a process, exercised by all), any dilemma, observation about how we function as a team may be perceived (by the leader and by team members both) as signalling criticism of the leader, rather than an invitation to explore. In hierarchy-conscious cultures, this may be a clear no-no as there is a risk that it makes leaders feel vulnerable or at least uncomfortable.

There are many unconscious reasons why dilemmas are not 'seen' and therefore not acknowledged. Here are a few.



Defences Against Anxiety

Pushed into the unconscious is anxiety about what may be revealed if a difficult issue is explored.

Pushed into the unconscious is anxiety about what may be revealed if a difficult issue is explored (revealed about myself, and/or revealed about others, or about the inherent difficulties of the idea under consideration itself). The unconscious anxiety is about whether we will be able to contain, bear, work with these revelations. The 'way out' is to resort to a defence mechanism to prevent this anxiety-causing material to pop up. For instance, '**denial**' is a deep and powerful unconscious defence. Another unconscious mechanism at the group level could be **scapegoating** – putting all the source of difficulty on one person, and making him or her the sole reason why the team has any problems. This unconscious mechanism serves to absolve all other members of any part in the dilemmas.

The Pressure to Know, to be Decisive, to Have Solutions

Most organisation cultures stress these over the ability to 'not know always', to be in a state of uncertainty, to be open to what emerges, to learn from unexpected sources, to bear not being "right". A consequence of this is there is no time, no development of skills, and little interest in open reflective conversations, in which meaning-making is co-created. Unconsciously, the fear about uncertainty being dangerous or at least undesirable, leads to very little surfacing of dynamics that need to be unravelled before they can be fixed.

The Fear of Interrelationships and Interdependencies

Again, cultures that valorise autonomy, individual performance and rewards, unconsciously make the reality of interdependences in any system a weakness. Interdependencies are equated with loss of control. Thus, this area of exploration is avoided as it may reveal the fallacy that one can never take the credit for results or performance – as it is an outcome of many dependencies. While this is often given lip service, at the unconscious level it is never quite believed.

Ambivalence about Groups

Linked to the above is the slightly different point about the difficulty of working in a 'group setting'. Working in groups, and Team Coaching as well, is work in public. By public we mean the public setting of the group as a whole or in larger organisational meetings. Wilfred Bion, the seminal thinker and observer of unconscious processes in groups, said this of our ambivalence about groups – human beings both love and hate their 'groupishness'! We deal with the anxiety of working in public, by saying things confidentially "after a meeting" to individuals one-on-one, under the guise that we are protecting them. It is ourselves we may be actually protecting! The assumption about fragility of others is often an unconscious projection of the assumed fragility of oneself.

These are just some examples of why, either consciously or unconsciously, teams may take the "all is well" position. Many more reasons can be discovered. Some curious attention to our experiences in teams will help us see that these points are also interrelated at various levels!

What may also be discovered is that once teams have the taste of working as a group on their own processes (and this can happen even by the 4th session of a Team Coaching process), it can be a relief and lead to new discoveries, the discarding of assumptions that no longer are seen to be valid, and stronger relationships.

Here's to many such discoveries!

– Rosemary Viswanath

We deal with the anxiety of working in public, by saying things confidentially "after a meeting" to individuals one-on-one, under the guise that we are protecting them. It is ourselves we may be actually protecting!

THE TEAM COACH AS A QUIET ALCHEMIST

I remember my first big Team Coaching assignment vividly. I was excited – a group of senior leaders, and my co-coach.

It didn't take long to realise how different this work was from one-on-one coaching. With an individual, the attention is fully on a single person: their story, their triggers, their growth. With a team, the field was infinitely more complex. It was live theatre. Conversations unfolded in layers. Alliances formed and dissolved in real time. Silence carried as much meaning as words. At any moment, I found myself tracking not just what was being said, but how it was being said, who was included or excluded, and what energy shifted when certain topics arose. My mind was constantly scanning like a radar – stretching in all directions, demanding multi-dimensional awareness.

Then there was the added dimension of being part of another team – my co-coach. Do I step in now, or leave space for my co-coach? Who names the tension in the room? Who challenges, who holds back? It called for a measured dose of patience and trust. It was a silent, real-time dance of collaboration – building understanding without words.

Honestly, the emotional demands were heavier than I expected. It was a practice in self-regulation and radical humility. The coach became a human mirror for the team's anxiety, resistance, and dysfunction – requiring the labour of processing that energy without absorbing it, staying steady and non-anxious as the system faltered or became defensive. With a co-coach, this was both a lifeline and a vulnerability. My partner saw me fully: my moments of doubt, blind spots, and triggers. The work

became a relentless reflection in real time. My greatest tool here wasn't a technique, but my own examined and regulated presence.

Team Coaching demanded broader intellectual framing, deeper emotional resilience, and relationship intelligence of me. This intricate process – of holding systems, managing self, and co-creating in partnership – taught me to think in connections, not categories; forged my capacity to remain present within uncertainty and to hold individual expertise alongside collective inquiry.

For every moment of connection, there were a few lost. But then, a crack appeared: a moment of raw honesty. A leader owned their part in a conflict. A team acknowledged a shared fear. They saw each other. That was the reward: simply witnessing them choose to be together.

I realised the most profound transformations – for teams and for oneself – can only happen in the challenging, sacred space of we.

– Ruby Thapar

Some Frequently Asked Questions about Team Coaching

1

Do individuals get coached in Team Coaching?

Team Coaching focuses on coaching the team as one entity. Individuals receive direct, actionable input from peers about the impact of their behaviour on the team, and the team collectively holds people accountable for follow-through. All of this happens in the Team Coaching space and not in private. So in a way, the team ends up coaching its own members.

Does Team Coaching lead to better business results?

Team Coaching prepares the team to work more effectively together. While this can lead to better business results, that is not the goal of Team Coaching. It is the growth of the team into being more cohesive, open and collaborative that would be the goal of a Team Coaching engagement.

2**3**

Can an executive coach also do Team Coaching?

No, Team Coaching requires special skills that executive coaches would not have received in their training. It is important that one use trained and certified Team Coaches for something as complex as top team effectiveness.

4

Can only intact teams be coached?

No, any team that has to work together to achieve certain goals can benefit from Team Coaching. The leader needs to be a part of this engagement.

What is the ideal size of a team that can be coached?

An ideal range is 8-12 members including the leader. Anything greater is not impossible but comes with added complexities of subgroups and more social loafing.

5

6

Does the team leader need to be part of the engagement?

Yes, it is extremely important for the team leader to be a part of the engagement as in many ways, the coaches aim to help them work better with their teams. In some cases, it could also turn out that the team leader is the problem and not the team!

A leader wanted his team to step up and take more ownership. However, every little thing also needed his approval. It was clear why the team was holding back and we would never have arrived at this had the team leader not been part of the intervention.

A QUICK 'TEAM HEALTH CHECK' TOOL!

Do you check the health of your team? Get your team to take this survey anonymously and use the results to have meaningful discussions on what is going well and what can be better!

Dimensions of Team Effectiveness

This is a tool for your subjective assessment of aspects that you believe your team is already doing well, and aspects where you believe it needs to develop more. Think about your team while you read the statements under each of the 8 dimensions below. For those statements within each dimension that you believe are a **strength** of the team, please mark S. For statements that you believe are a **development area**, please mark DA.

This is a discussion tool, and hence there are no right and wrong answers. Team members may use their own views or opinions to have a dialogue about their respective perceptions.

1. Team Norms

- a. To demonstrate respect irrespective of performance
- b. To experience a sense of belonging to the team
- c. To respect each other's time
- d. To have regular meetings and reviews
- e. To recognise, celebrate and reward good performance

2. Communication

- a. To have timely task-relevant information flow
- b. To have a flow of communication that facilitates interdependence between members, with no surprises
- c. To share important information and ensure there are no surprises at critical moments
- d. To communicate optimism and support between team members
- e. To actively contribute to meetings through participation, documentation and follow up

3. Openness

- a. To be able to voice an opinion or idea without fear of judgement
- b. To feel free enough to give immediate and actionable feedback with respect
- c. To receive feedback with grace
- d. To feel confident enough to voice one's challenges and ask for help
- e. To be able to call out an action or statement that does not align with team philosophy

4. Coordination, Cooperation, & Collaboration

- a. To synchronise efforts when there are interdependencies
- b. To focus on timely execution

- c. To pitch in and support team members when they are facing challenges
- d. To support each other's growth
- e. To present a united front to the external world

5. Zest and Enthusiasm

- a. To have a positive impact on one another's morale and motivation
- b. To enjoy spending time together in the workplace
- c. To demonstrate resilience in the face of setbacks
- d. To place the team goal ahead of personal goals

6. Conflict, Problem-Solving & Decision-Making

- a. To actively participate in the decision-making, problem-solving process
- b. To welcome and embrace positive conflict with respect
- c. To focus on the problem and not the person
- d. To practise inclusion and resourcefulness in decision-making and problem-solving
- e. To take ownership and commit to decisions made

7. Team Leader

- a. Is fair and impartial
- b. Is open to ideas and receiving feedback
- c. Shares information appropriately
- d. Is protective of the team from the worst of external pressures
- e. Empowers and delegates

We would love to hear from you – what you think about Team Coaching, your own experiences and of course your own practical perspectives on what it will take to make this work!

Please write in to ganesh@cfi.co.in with your feedback and views!



<https://www.youtube.com/@CFI-CoachingFoundationIn-bb8mw/videos>



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/coaching-foundation-india-cfi/>



https://x.com/CFI_Coaching



In our next issue:
'Changing Contours of Leadership in Manufacturing'